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OWLHOOT SUBSTITUTE

by Edwin Truett

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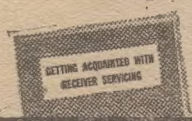

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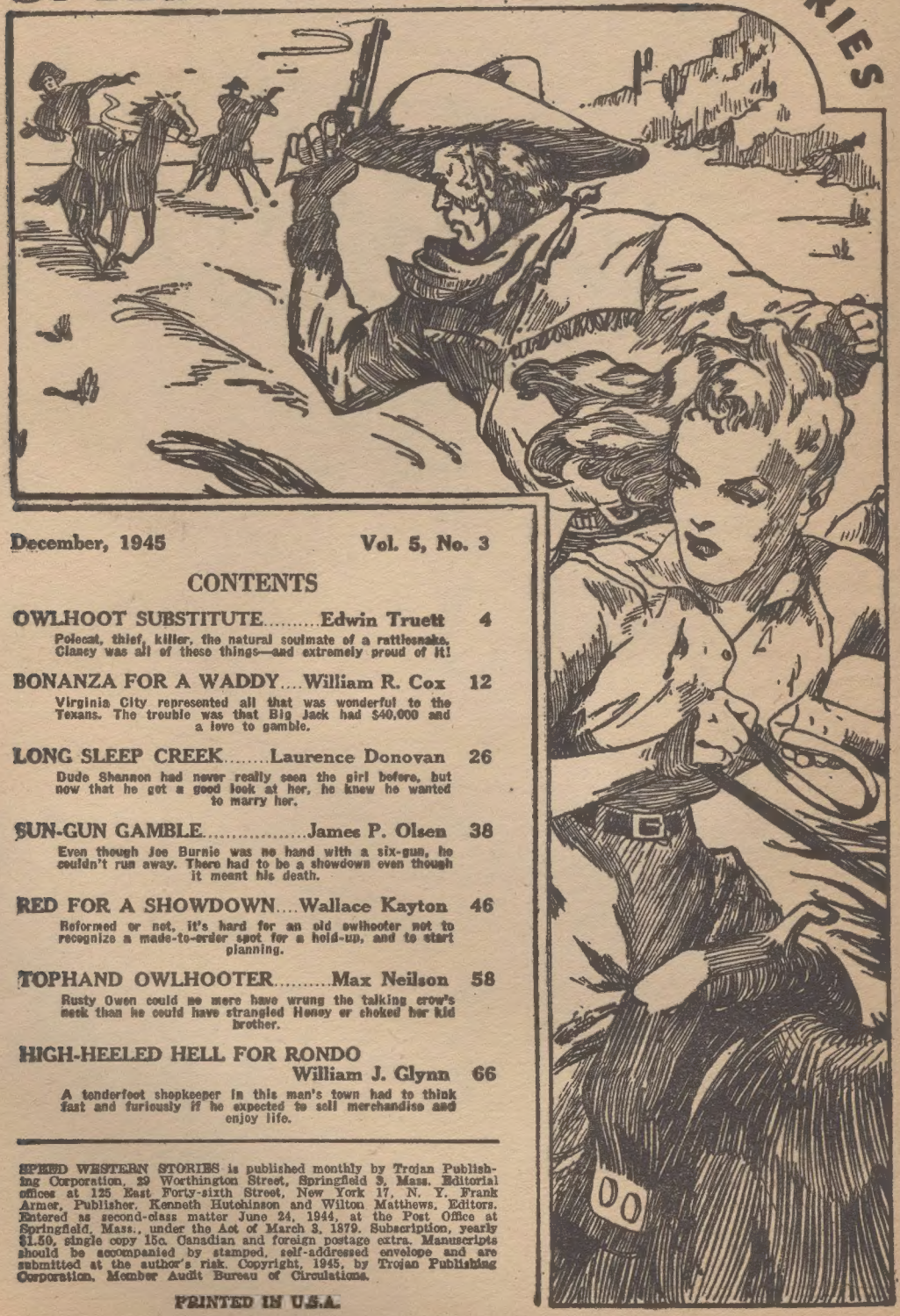

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SPEED WESTERN STORIES is published monthly by Trojan Publishing Corporation, 29 Worthington Street, Springfield 3, Mass. Editorial offices at 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York 17, N. Y. Frank Armer, Publisher. Kenneth Hutchinson and Wilton Matthews, Editors. Entered as second-class matter June 24, 1944, at the Post Office at Springfield, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Subscription, yearly $1.50, single copy 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright, 1945, by Trojan Publishing Corporation. Member Audit Bureau of Circulations.

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. . . OWLHOOT

Clancy was a two-legged polecat and proud of it, as many another had been. He was a killer, a thief, and quite certainly the natural soulmate of a rattlesnake. And all he had to do now was outwit a few Rangers and Mexican rurales. And after that—well, there remained nothing to outwit except the grim laughter of fate itself . . .

Clancy sighted the rifle carefully, squeezed the trigger. Mac fell down.

NEVER had Clancy run so far and so fast with so little success as this time. Right from the start, he cursed, the job had been a jinx to him. Oh, he'd pulled off the raid on his own hook pretty successfully, he'd taken over the little hacienda with only three killings! Lying there in a dense catclaw and *colima* thicket in very sight of the muddy river and safety, he grinned wryly thinking over that part. The old man hadn't been too stubborn, either. A few matches stuck to his old wife's bare feet and he'd opened up quick enough. The cache had been pretty well stocked, too. Silver and gold as well as paper pesos.

Clancy parted the bushes carefully and glared with his one good eye at the darkening sky. He wanted a smoke so damned bad he'd give—no, he wouldn't give that eye for it. Another hour and a half and darkness would descend on the valley. Then to hell with the *rurales*, those hard-riding, hard-fighting Mexican lawmen who lay between him and the river, trying to cut him off from safety. In the dark, Clancy could move like the coyote, like the snake he was.

Rurales! Mexes! He spat viciously. For ten years Clancy had ridden the river, playing both sides, running for Mexico when things got a little hot on the American side, running for the States when they were too warm in Mexico. With all of a lawbreaker's fatalism he'd always realized that sooner or later he'd have to take it on the chin. But he'd always figured, with all of a badman's

SUBSTITUTE

By EDWIN TRUETT

scorn, that the Mexes would never get him! Not Clancy.

Yet for nearly a week he'd ridden the river, hard-pressed by those same avenging *rurales*, with never a chance of hitting the water and getting across. Yesterday evening they'd got his horse. He cursed again, remembering that. Not that he gave a damn about the horse, but the gold and silver loot had been in the saddlebags, and the damned posse had been so close on his heels he hadn't even

time to grab his carbine out of the boot. Instead he'd scuttled for the buttes near the river and gradually worked down this way.

But tonight! Ah, tonight there'd be no moon. And tonight Clancy knew exactly where he was going. Sanctuary to a fleeing owlhooter was as important as a hideout den to a fox. And almost directly across the Rio Grande was Concha Ryan's place.

Not that he knew Concha—except by reputation. A friend of his had once told him about her little rancho back in the hills—and the way she'd hide a man—always for a fee, of course. Well, to hell with the fee. He had plenty of paper pesos left. He'd pay whatever she asked, get a new horse and take off for the East.

Again he twisted his mouth wryly. He realized that he was about played out in the Western parts. Clancy, the lone wolf, had pulled a few too many kill jobs there in the past six months, on both sides of the Rio Grande. Still, if those Mexes weren't so hot after him! Mexes! Damn them, he'd never bothered adding a Mex to his total of murdered victims. But from now on! Hell, a Mex was as good a notch on his gun as a gringo!

CLANCY'S bad luck still held. Around midnight, wading easily and quietly, he was almost across the river, when the Mexican moon decided to peer blandly from behind what had seemed to be an impenetrable cloud bank. Almost at once the night rang with the cries of the *rurales*.

"O yé O yé! Andale!" Then the hot lead was seeking him out in the turgid waters. He lost his head a bit and tried to run for it in the restraining water until he'd been creased and thrown on his face, nearly drowning. A log floated by and he managed to get an arm over it and somehow floundered ashore. But he was scared even then, scared those *rurales* would come right over after him. They were almost as bad as Rangers.

He took three minutes to catch his breath and take his bearings, then limped off into the brush toward the north and the east.

It was nearly false dawn when he made the arroyo where his owlhoot pal had told him Concha Ryan's place was. It was just as had been described to him, a nondescript adobe of several sprawling rooms with adobe outhouses and a pole corral at the rear. He went closer and, throwing back his head, hooted three times like an owl, counted to ten and hooted three times more.

Shortly a light appeared in a window. This, too, was as his pal had told him it would be. For the light moved back and forth across the window three times. He grinned, hooted again and limped on his tired feet toward the door. It was open a bare crack.

A husky, feminine voice said, *"Quien es?* Who is it? *Que tal?"*

"Mike Clancy," he whispered, and gave the name of his pal who had given him the location of the border hideout. Still the door didn't open any wider. Almost subconsciously his hand sought for the butt of the thonged-down gun at his right hip.

The husky voice went on, *"Uno momento, señor.* Have patience. From where do you ride?"

"A wet trail," he said grimly. "I got creased wading the river and I'm on foot. They said I could make a deal with you. I've got plenty of pesos—?"

"Just unbuckle your gunbelt and drop it easylike." This voice came from behind him. And this voice was a man's voice, harsh and purposeful. Clancy cursed viciously, but he dropped his gunbelt. The door opened then. The voice behind him said, "Now go on in, *compadre.*" He stepped into the room and gazed around. The door closed behind him.

The woman's husky contralto said, "Your pardon, *señor,* but in this business one cannot be too careful. If you will sit down I will dress your wound." She put the lamp on the table and turned toward him, smilingly. Clancy's heart turned a complete flipflop.

Concha Ryan was the color of *coffee au*

lait. Her eyes were large and liquid black, as black and shiny as her swirling hair. She might have been twenty or she might have been forty, but her body was the svelte perfection of one of those ageless women who go down in history. Clancy, the border rider, the frequenter of border saloons and brush *cantinas*, admired her boldly with his eyes.

"Just raise your hands high, first, *compadre.*" The voice brought him back to reality then. He raised his hands over his head and looked over his shoulder. The man with the gun was as tall as Clancy himself, and almost as weather-beaten. His eyes were cold and hard and his mouth was a thin slit cut in the granite of his face. Now, quickly, an experienced hand went over Clancy's still-damp body, found his money belt, felt its thickness.

Cursing, he removed the belt at the black-eyed man's command. "This," he proclaimed bitterly, "is a pretty hi-de-do! Robbing me when they told me I could hole up here for a few days!"

"Sit down in the chair and take off your shirt, *amigo,*" she said.

He saw now that Concha Ryan had laid out white bandages and unguents on the table beside the lamp.

"No one robs you." There was derision in her voice, in her sparkling eyes. "Just a precaution we always take here at the rancho. You can stay as long as you please, as long as you have money to pay. But your money, temporarily, if you please, will be well hidden. Thus, *señor,* it would do you no good to murder us in our beds and ride away, for I assure you, you would never find your money."

Clancy started to curse his reply, thought better of it and sat down, removing his shirt. Behind him he heard the door open and close, knew the black-eyed ranny had gone out into the darkness. Concha hummed beneath her breath as she bathed his shoulder and applied the salve, bandaged it neatly. All the time Clancy's eyes were upon her. Then she was finished—and went about fixing him something to eat.

BY THIS TIME the man was back in the house. They talked over and about him as if he simply didn't exist. The man, he learned, was named Mac, but try as he might Clancy couldn't place the lean, saturnine face. However, there was no mistaking the relationship between these two who ran this strange hideout. Funny, mused Clancy, that his pal hadn't mentioned this Concha Ryan's having a husband. He sopped up the last of the egg yellow with a bit of *tortilla,* licked his fingers noisily and settled back to roll a smoke. His shoulder was a little stiff and his feet were sore from his unaccustomed walking—

"You're safe," Mac grinned. "You're the only customer we got right now, Clancy." He went out, closing the door behind him. Clancy waited split seconds before he, too, was at the door. The sky was just turning grey when he pressed his ear to the window and listened.

The woman was saying, "You know him, *corazon?*"

"Clancy? I've heard of him. A cheap Border killer, a drygulcher. I'm glad we're getting out of this, Concha. Rannies like him." His laughter was bitter. "Not that I'm any better myself, God knows. The sound of the palm of his hand banging the table came to Clancy. "Hon, I'm going to return that money! We'll go on into Mexico like we've planned, but I'm going to give back that money I got from the bank."

Money? Bank? Clancy literally pricked up his ears. What was she saying?

"— is for you to say, *corazon?* You only took what they stole from your brother! And even twenty thousand will never pay for his life! After all, Anderson had him killed when he protested! You know that."

Clancy heard the clink of a bottle against a glass. "I know," Mac said. "And I got Anderson and two of his killers. That's not it, sweetheart. I was the law too long, I rode behind a star too long. That money is sticking in my craw, I tell you. Now don't get scared. I'll pull out with you, we'll have that little rancho across the Border like we've planned.

God knows there's nothing left for me after those killings but to ride the owlhoot if I don't. It's just that I got to give the money back. I won't be able to live thinking about it."

Clancy heard a chair scuff on the floor, fled back down the path to the little lean-to, grinning. So! Mack was a former lawman! He'd killed somebody—a banker named Anderson—because the banker had beat his brother out of a lot of money. Twenty thousand dollars!

Clancy licked his lips there in the darkness thinking of the fun he could have with all that money. Twenty thousand dollars! He was still licking his lips at the thought of it when he dropped off to sleep.

IT WAS NOON of the second day when he told Mac he was ready to ride. Mac nodded, said, "Okay, mister, I'll catch you up a horse." Mac put on his hat and walked out of the adobe.

From where he sat, Clancy could see him going down a path toward the northwest. His beady eye also noted the rifle standing in the corner. The woman flipped his eggs skillfully, slid them onto a plate and brought them to the table. For a moment she paused there, putting them in front of him.

Clancy, head pointed toward the doorway, said, "Hey, what the hell do you want?"

She turned her head, surprised. His heavy fist crashed into the coffee-colored flesh behind her ear. She crumpled to the floor. Swiftly he picked her up, tossed her onto the thong bed, bound her and gagged her. Even unconscious she was beautiful.

Clancy had work to do. Satisfied that she was safe, he seized the rifle, saw that it was loaded and hurried out of the house and down the northwest trail.

The corral was cunningly concealed. Clancy's anger flared again as he saw the crowbait paint pony Mac was saddling. The ranny was hoping to foist this thing off on *him?* Hell! Already Clancys eyes had picked out the magnificent steel gelding he meant to have. He sighted the rifle carefully, squeezed the trigger. Mac went down.

A moment later Clancy leaned over the inert figure contemptuously. He didn't really need to look, he told himself. Clancy never missed. The hairpin's head was a mass of blood. He kicked the body over, took off the gunbelt and buckled it around his own waist. Take *his* gun, would he. Steal *his* money! The six-shooter, he noted with interest, was a magnificent, hand-chased weapon with ebony handles, well polished. And there were eleven notches filed on it too. Clancy felt pretty proud of himself. He saddled the steeldust with a Mexican carved kak he found in the saddleshed, grinned down at the unmoving man in the dust and set out toward the adobe once again.

What followed wasn't exactly pretty. However, it could have been much worse if Clancy hadn't been innately such a coward. Something in the scornful black eyes of Concha Ryan made him pause before he quite succeeded in doing all of the things he'd been minded to do. Now she lay, still bound but ungagged, on the cot cursing him in three languages. He grinned at her, filling his belt to repletion with twenty-dollar gold pieces from the cache she had so unwillingly revealed. His eyes gloated over her slender feet, now red and angry where his matches had burned them. Clancy enjoyed his fun.

"Kill me, go on, damn you, kill me!" she raged. "If you don't, I'll follow you down to hell and kill you!"

He shook his head gravely. "I don't kill women, pretty things. If I thought you'd behave, I'd take you with me—but what the hell. I reckon you're just safer tied there, you hellcat."

Methodically he went through the place, found new clothes belonging to Mac and donned them with admiration. His luck was running good. Even Mac's boots and Stetson fit him. After awhile he went over to the bed and tightened the knots that bound Concha tightly. "I won't gag you," he simpered. "Your man ain't in no shape to hear you calling for help."

She spat at him, and the last thing he heard was her curses. He didn't mind.

He was listening to the pleasant clink of twenty-dollar gold pieces. They made nice music.

JUST BEFORE SUNDOWN Concha opened her eyes and screamed at the bloody ghost who reeled into the *adobe*. But the ghost was no ghost; he cut her loose, held her close for a few moments. He saw her blistered feet, and all the blood drained from his face.

The shot from Clancy's rifle had creased Mac deeply, and in falling he had hit the back of his head on a sharp-point-

ed rock. The cut there was more vicious than the crease, and it was this blood that Clancy had seen, this gaping wound,

"Kill me, kill me!" she raged. "If you don't, I'll follow you to hell!"

which made him think his drygulching had been a success. Concha Ryan soon had both wounds cleaned and closed.

And less than an hour after he had so miraculously returned to life, Mac Gordon was on his way after the man named Clancy.

It was forty-three miles to Three Rivers, the nearest town. Mac kept well away from any spot that might have served as a camp, for he was pretty sure that Clancy, secure as he thought he was from pursuit, would not push the gelding hard.

Mac entered Three Rivers from the north, sat his horse in a dark alley for a moment trying to locate the thing he needed. The print shop, now it was where? The bank—he remembered the bank all too well. A crooked grin overspread his face just remembering that bank, remembering Banker Anderson's expression as he, Mac, had shoved twenty thousand dollars into a bag and handed it to a masked man. But the print shop? Ah, he had it. Two blocks to the right and down that side street. He hoped the night marshal was a hard drinker.

A few moments later he went into the print shop through an alley window, tiptoed through it and pulled the ragged blinds down clear to the bottom. He lit a stub of candle, hating to take the risk, but knowing it was necessary. Back at the composing table he took a paper-wrapped package from his shirt pocket, unwrapped it and stared down at it with conflicting emotions.

It was a rough newspaper cut of Mac Gordon, himself. "Jack of all trades and master of none," he murmured aloud. Years before, when he was a much younger man, he'd learned the printing business. That, of course, was before he became a two-gun sheriff of a tough Oklahoma county. He found a stylus and, working quickly but efficiently, blanked up an eye on the cut. He remembered a certain scar, and swiftly put the long white scar on the forehead and right cheek. He found a composing stick, and a form of the proper size, the type. An hour later he blew out the candle, let the shades up and went out the way he had come.

He remembered there was a whistle stop about three quarters of a mile up the line from Three Rivers. In the cool grey of dawn he rode toward it . . .

MOST of the early risers in the town of Three Rivers went to the depot at 10:10 each morning to meet the train. Shanks, the town marshal, was always among them. His eye was quick to find and spot the grim-looking stranger who alit from the smoker, paused to light a stogie and look about inquiringly. His eye spotted the big gold-and-silver sheriff's badge quicker. He walked over to him, stuck out his hand.

"Howdy, sheriff. I'm Clem Shanks, town marshal."

"My name's Jones. Sheriff William Jones of Pawhuska," said the newcomer.

They chatted for a moment, Shanks waiting patiently for the out-of-town sheriff to reveal his business. When it came he didn't know whether or not his legs was being pulled. At the Silver Horseshoe Bar, Sheriff Jones said, jocosely, "You fellers ain't seen nothing of another sheriff from Pawhuska down around here, have you?"

"Another sheriff from—?"

Sheriff Jones pulled a handbill from his pocket and laid it on the bar, sighing. "I worked for Mac Gordon for eight years before he blew up and went bad." He shook his head sadly. "When a good man goes badman he goes all the way out. Here's his picture. Got a bad eye and a bad scar. Damned good description of him. Carries a black-handled presentation gun and is pretty crazy about nice clothes—particularly hand-made boots. We got a tip that he used to have a brother down in these parts and that he's headed this way."

Marshal Shanks turned things over fast in his mind, his eyes brooding. He was thinking of the description of the ranny that had knocked off the Three Rivers bank and killed Old Man Anderson. A teller had described his fancy

boots! Boots stitched fancy, inlaid, and bearing a high polish.

He shook his head. Casually, he asked, "What you going to do with him when you find him, sheriff?"

Sheriff Jones looked surprised. "Do? Why, crackey, I'll ride him back to Pawhuska and get him tried, that's what I'm here for."

Almost idly, Shanks said, "Remember what he was riding?" He knew what the bank bandit had been riding! A steeldust gelding.

"Yep. A hawss he stole from me—a steeldust gelding. I still got a bill of sale on him." He showed it—made out to Deputy Sheriff William Jones. "Reckon I'll hunt up the sheriff, mister, and have a little talk with him."

He went out of the saloon. Clem Shanks, knowing on which side his bread was buttered, set out up the street toward Three Rivers Bank. Young Artie Anderson was a hard man. He'd taken over the bank after his father's death—murder, he called it. He looked at the dodger Clem Shanks put before him on the desk with interest. He read the measurements of the wanted ex-sheriff and called the teller.

Afterward he looked out the window for a long time before speaking. "Could be," he acknowledged. "These small-town sheriffs don't go off half-cocked, you know that. The fact that he's down here shows he must have a tip of some kind. Suppose you put out word for the boys to keep their eyes open. Tell the sheriff to take all the dodgers this fellow can give him. One thing is damned sure, if he shows up, he'll never get back to Pawhuska!"

Marshal Shanks went out grinning.

CLANCY felt good when he rode into Three Rivers shortly after noon on the gelding. His belt was heavy with money, he was wearing better clothes than he had ever possessed in his life. Even his boots were shiny. Looked like a pretty good town, too, he observed, looping the gelding to a hitchrail before a saloon. He was pretty dry. If everything went all right maybe he'd stay around a while. The thought came to him of the fellow Mac and that good-looking woman, Concha. Taking his money, his gun! Damned novices! They didn't know who they was messing around with.

A man got up off the porch of the grocery and walked swiftly down the street toward the bank, his feet kicking up little clouds of dust. The dust made Clancy even dryer. He went through the batwing doors and bellied the bar.

"Whiskey," he said jovially, "and have one yourself." A twenty-dollar gold piece rang on the mahogany.

It tasted good. He took another—and another. In fact he didn't notice that the place was beginning to be well-filled. He didn't notice young Anderson come in and stand at the end of the bar, didn't notice that the bartender surreptitiously handed him a twenty-dollar gold piece, which Anderson examined carefully.

In fact, Clancy didn't even know that almost all the loot taken by the masked man from the Anderson Bank had been in twenty-dollar gold pieces.

He did think it a little funny when a scared-faced little rabbit of a fellow walked behind him and kept looking at his nice shiny boots.

Somebody tapped his shoulder. He saw the star on the fellow's vest and grinned. Hell, he was clean in this town. The fellow said, "Howdy, Sheriff Mac Gordon?"

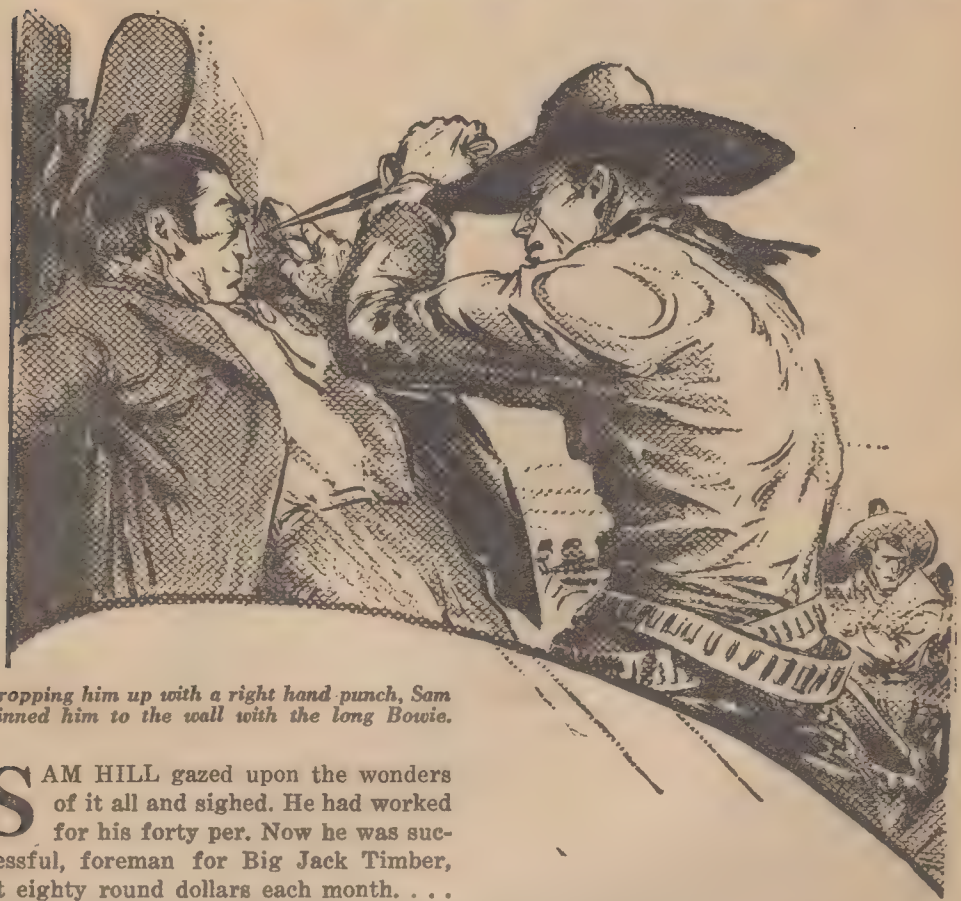
Clancy shook his head and said there must be some mistake. His name was Smith and he was riding through. He even invited the little man to have a drink. But just then the doors came open and a man came in. Clancy's eyes widened! This couldn't be! Hell, he'd shot this Mac hairpin right through the head. He'd taken him for everything he had! He'd—!

"Yeah, Gordon," said the newcomer, "it's me. Not near as dead as you thought!"

Clancy snarled and went for his gun. The man who called himself Sheriff Jones of Pawhuska did some fancy shooting then, although scarcely anyone in the

(Continued on page 73)

BONANZA FOR A



Propping him up with a right hand punch, Sam pinned him to the wall with the long Bowie.

SAM HILL gazed upon the wonders of it all and sighed. He had worked for his forty per. Now he was successful, foreman for Big Jack Timber, at eighty round dollars each month. . . .

But in Virginia City miners received four dollars per day, foremen as much as one thousand every month. . . . Thirty-five thousand people crowded the twin towns. . . . Up on the hill the stamp mills pounded and the magic terms "Comstock Lode" . . . "Big Bonanza" . . . buy it at six, sell at six hundred . . . were easy on the lips of the feverish adventurers of newly formed Nevada Territory. . . .

A fast express from Frisco brought fresh fruits, vegetables, meats daily into the International Hotel, six stories high and with elevators! The *Morning Enterprise* was a daily paper . . . with such as Sam Clemens working on its staff. . . . The gambling establishments were fabulous, with Jubal Clay leading the pack. . . .

In Texas it was never like this. Sam

To the two Texans Virginia City was a fabulous, wondrous place. The trouble was that Big Jack Timber had $40,000 in his kick, and loved to gamble. On the other hand, that weakness of Jack's was to bring Sam Hill something more important than all that trouble or money were worth!

WADDY

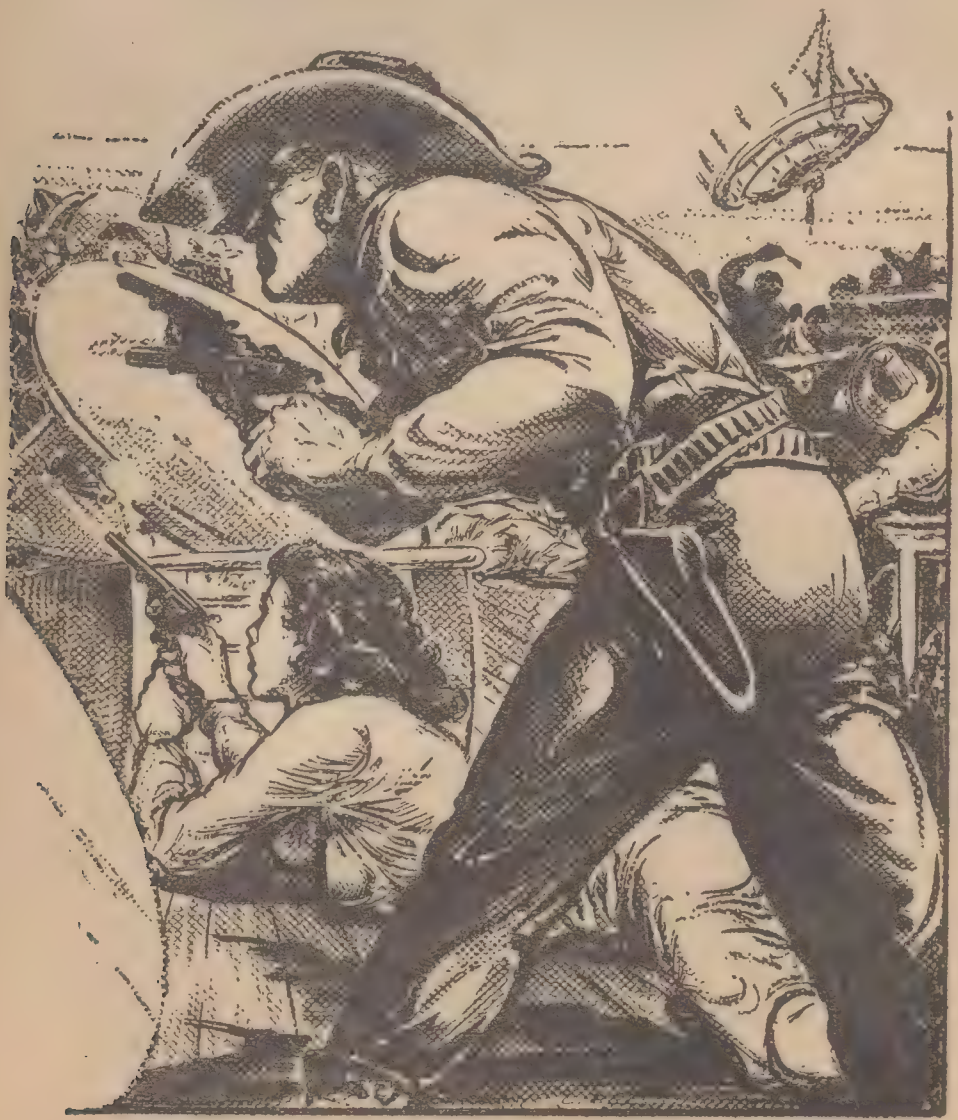
By WILLIAM R. COX

Hill felt like a tenderfoot, but nothing daunted Jack Timber. The giant ranch owner pushed his sombrero back on his fair skull and grinned down at Sam's mere six feet. "Reckon this is it, Sambo. Take my little stake and run it up an' go home an' buy half o' Texas!"

Sam said, "I've seen a lot of Texas, and all the money in the Comstock Lode wouldn't buy half of her."

The owner of the Rocking T laughed merrily. He had blue eyes, and in them lurked recklessness. He was a working fool on the drives, a king in his own country—or a baron, nearly a king. But he had that gambling fever. "It'll buy enough fer me to beat out Harry Lake and marry Mary. . . ."

Bedizened females strolled by, openly courting the Texas men. Rough-clad min-



ers came and went in the brilliantly lighted bars. Virginia never slept. The mines worked three shifts, with eight thousand men always loose in the streets of town. Booth played "Hamlet" at Piper's Opera House, and down the street there were two gunfights and a knifiing. . . . Sam said, "That forty thousand you got in your kick will see you and Mary through."

"I need twice that," Jack said. "I got plans. There's stuff I need for Mary, there's things I got to do."

Sam said, "Time'll take care of it. Harry Lake's cautious. He's the kind a woman should marry, dammit!"

"I know it," Jack said. "I wanta buy Grey's place, the Sands waterhole, stock up with Herefords. . . ."

He was ambitious, he was wild with eagerness. They had come all the way to Virginia on the heels of fantastic tales of gold in the streets, which they had not quite believed, yet had been forced to test. Sam sighed again. In deference to city ways he had his .45 tucked in his belt, under his jacket. This was not an excursion which pleased him. The high altitude was uncomfortable, the gay metropolis was only confusing.

Still, it had to be done, Jack being Jack. He shrugged and said, "I been with you before when you went bust. . . . Mary's a mighty patient girl. . . . Let's git it over with!"

"Pessimist!" roared Jack, his easy humor restored. "Let's hit Jubal Clay's! Let's do it plumb right."

THEY went down the street toward the dimly lighted, magnificently appointed club run by the southern gambler whose fame had reached to Kansas, where they had first listened to tales of Virginia City. Sam was resigned. Jack Timber would gamble his last dime, shrewdly enough, but with ill luck. . . .

They made a striking pair, even in this town of strange sights. Jack was six feet six in his socks—but he wore high-heeled Texas boots. Sam was only six feet—but broader than his boss. They had the wind and sun of Texas on them, like badges. People looked and smiled, for these men were without guile in a land of money-mad semi-lunatics. . . .

They entered Jubal Clay's place. They left their hats with a girl in short dresses which made them look away, and self-consciously slicking down their cowlicks, proceeded into the glittering illumination of a hundred candelabras. There were tables galore, there were men and women in all costumes. There were faro, roulette, monte, picquet . . . any and every game of chance the mind of man had invented. There were silken-clad, soft-spoken croupiers, there were deadly quiet men who merely watched, guns concealed but ready. One of these stepped close and patted the Texans with deft hands.

He smiled at them, a dark man, sleek, with a strong jaw and steady eyes. "You'll have to check these guns, gents. I'm Kildeen, Clay's manager."

Jack Timber laughed infectiously. "Plumb forgot the hardware, Kildeen. Kinda useta it, you know?"

"Sure," nodded Kildeen agreeably. "I know."

Jack had his gun out, carelessly handing it over. Sam hesitated. In his blunt manner, he said, "It's okay, I reckon. . . . But I see by the bulge you got one on you, Kildeen!"

"To maintain order," nodded Kildeen. "In case someone slips by us, armed and belligerent." He was patient, still smiling, but his sharp eyes focused upon Sam, as though he would not forget.

Sam reluctantly unloaded his gun and placed it in Kildeen's keeping. He followed Jack, knowing exactly where the big rancher would wind up. His eye caught the figure of a small man, a man with the face of a cherubic angel, who seemed interested in their progress. The man came close and said cheerfully, "Looking for the poker rooms, men?"

Jack said, "How'd you guess?"

The little man had a pink face and his voice was soft and slurred. "I'm Jubal Clay. . . . Texans always like poker. . . . May I have yawl's names?"

Jack introduced himself and Sam, adding, "Sam don't play nothin'. He's

ornery about gamblin'. But I'd admire to look at the pasteboards with you, sir."

Jubal Clay's smile broadened. He spread slender, white hands adorned with a diamond ring of noble proportions and said, "I scarcely ever indulge. . . . However, for Texans. . . . Kildeen!"

BEFORE they could say "scat" they found themselves in a large, airy room, high-ceilinged, well-ventilated. There was a green round deal table, immaculate red, white and blue chips heaped in a rack. Kildeen produced a decanter, glasses, a siphon of soda. A negro came in a white coat and poured. . . .

Kildeen reappeared with three men. One was named Jackson, and looked hard to Sam. He bore a scar which could have been received in a knife fight, but he was dressed in city clothes and white stock. The other two were slightly inebriated, bluff local businessmen. One was called Mayhew, the other Ferguson. They arranged themselves around the table without further ceremony, and Sam was free to watch or ramble, as he chose.

He looked around the table at the players. Jubal Clay had a reputation as a square gambler. Ferguson and Mayhew were obviously solid citizens on a spree. Jackson, of course, was a house man, but practice permitted the use of such as he. . . . There was nothing Sam could do. It was torture for him to watch Jack Timber gamble. . . .

Jack was not aware of the fact that Sam had once been a poker player of considerable talent. Sam had kept it from his boss when he had learned of Jack's fatal weakness. . . . He wandered out of the room and mingled with the crowds around the roulette wheel. He kept his eyes upon the croupier, thinking sadly of the generous, big-hearted owner of the Rocking T. . . .

Mary Evans was a sweet girl. She loved Jack. But Jack was big—in every way—and meant to be the king of the county back home. Nothing was good enough for Mary—nor for Jack. He planned to marry as soon as he made a big stage . . . not before.

Sam thought forty thousand was enough. It would restock the ranch, rebuild the house. It would put Jack on the road to prosperity. But Jack wanted to buy the properties around him . . . he was land hungry in a country where titles meant little. He wanted the knowledge of ownership, so that he could spread out farther than he could ride in a week, so that he could look at the green pastures and say, "These are mine!" And woe betide the man who tried to say him nay, Sam thought grimly. . . .

The wheel seemed honest, but of course it had the double zero. That was house percentage enough. . . . Sam edged forward until he was alongside a slim girl, who was flanked in turn by a mahogany-faced, high-cheekboned man in black. Sam looked twice at this man. He had, Sam was sure, much Indian blood. . . .

The girl seemed quite young, but calmly assured. She had grey eyes and a large mouth and was dressed modestly but richly in a satin gown of pale blue. Around her bare shoulders was a mantilla of exquisite workmanship. She was playing a stack of chips methodically, as if she had done it before.

Sam balanced silver dollars in his hand. He put ten on the red. . . . Red came up.

He put twenty on the black. . . . Black came up. The girl glanced at him and he saw that she was extremely handsome.

The Indian was playing seventeen. It hit. He shoved the chips on the black, laying off the numbers. . . . Sam put forty on the red.

Red won. . . . The girl had coppered and collected. The Indian's face was stony, but his black eyes glittered at Sam.

THE wheel spun. Sam's growing stack was on black. The Indian angrily put his on red. It was funny how people thought Indian blood made for reticence and stoicism, Sam thought. One touch of it made for childishness and vicious temper, he had found.

The black came up. Sam carefully removed his silver dollars and put them away. He held back some chips, put a couple on seventeen, a stack on red. The

wheel made a clacking sound. If he was careful and won occasionally, he could pass the evening here, he reckoned. He had no regrets about not having bet more. He had no illusions about winning a fortune at games. He had always worked hard, he always would, for what he got in this world.

The girl was following his every bet without another glance at him. The Indian was opposing him openly, waiting to see what he did, playing against him. The house man's hooded eyes went to Sam, the left one drooped infinitesimally. . . . Sam won again.

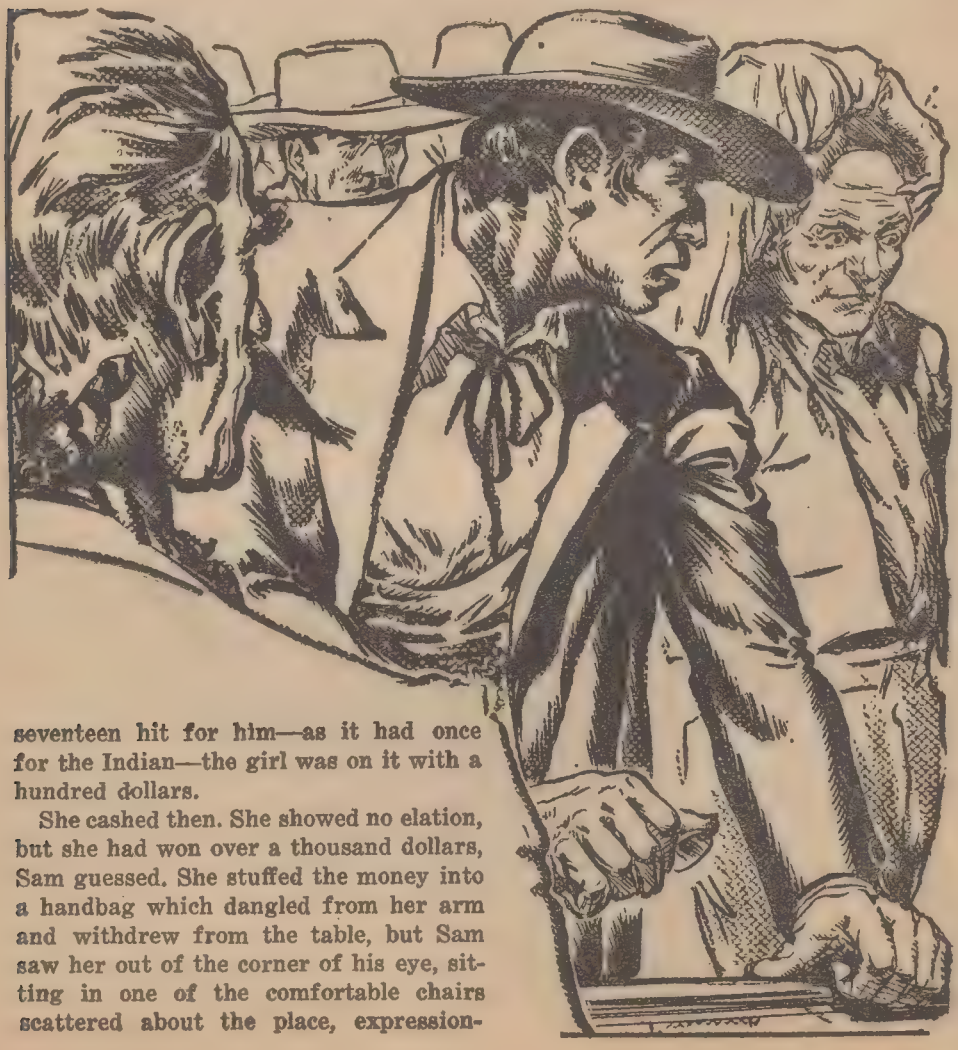
The whole table was interested now. Sam had lost only his number bets. When seventeen hit for him—as it had once for the Indian—the girl was on it with a hundred dollars.

She cashed then. She showed no elation, but she had won over a thousand dollars, Sam guessed. She stuffed the money into a handbag which dangled from her arm and withdrew from the table, but Sam saw her out of the corner of his eye, sitting in one of the comfortable chairs scattered about the place, expressionless, as though waiting for someone.

Sam played an hour, two hours. He lost a few times, but always his stack increased as time went by. The Indian bought again and again. Soon Sam could feel the hatred, unreasoning, animal-like, of the man who bet against him.

It was growing late and he wished to check on Jack's progress. He counted up. He was winner about a thousand dollars. He hesitated, then put fifty on seventeen, five hundred on red . . . which would leave him a good winner if he lost. He said, grinning at the croupier, "This is it, brother."

The croupier shrugged. He spun the wheel as the Indian played contrariwise



on black and on twenty-seven. . . . The little ball rattled merrily, sailed and soared in the wheel. It stopped. . . .

The Indian said in excellent English, "Damn you! You have poisoned my luck!"

It was seventeen and red. . . . The croupier piled chips and muttered, "Better run it up . . . You're hot. . ." He was a pale, thin man, with a lantern jaw and he did not look well. . . .

Sam said, "I'm no gambler, pal." He walked across the room, ignoring the Indian. He took wads of green money and retired to the men's rest room. He unwound a money belt and carefully placed his small fortune within. He had won enough for a stake, he thought, the import of the green stuff finally seeping into his consciousness. . . .He could buy some land of his own for this amount.

He went out into the big room. The girl still sat in the deep chair. She seemed weary now, but her face was blank of expression. . . . Men came through the door which led to the poker rooms.

Jack Timber loomed over them. He

Again the girl coppered and collected on Sam's bet.

was smiling. Sam looked hard at his boss. He heard Jubal Clay say in his soft voice, "Too bad, Timber. . . . Come again. . . ." Ferguson and Mayhew wandered off. Jackson was across the room, but his eyes never left Jack. . . . The girl arose from her chair, touched Clay's arm. The gambler bowed to Jack, led the way to a door marked "Private." . . .

Sam said, "So they cleaned you?"

"Uh-huh," said Jack. "Got enough to buy a drink?"

There was a bar at the end of the room. Sam pulled out his original stake, saying nothing about his winnings. Jack was capable of borrowing them and hitting the roulette table with his ill luck. They stood and bought a drink.

THE Indian was suddenly before Sam, his snake's eyes boring. He said, "You broke my luck. . . . A curse on you!"

Sam shrugged, turning away. The Indian had a Spanish accent. He was probably from Mexico. . . .

There was a scuffling sound. Sam whirled back, his hand going to his belt—where there was no gun. He saw the Indian going backwards, and there was blood on the dusky features. Jack rubbed the knuckles of his right hand and said, "He had a knife, Sam. You got to stop bein' so careless. . . ."

Kildeen appeared as though by magic. He said coldly, "You can't do that in here."

"He drew a knife on me," Sam said shortly.

"*Señor* Montez is an honored guest," Kildeen intoned. "He does not carry weapons. You'll have to leave."

Jack opened his mouth to bellow, but Sam touched his arm. He saw Jubal Clay and the girl coming from the office. The girl's bag did not bulge with money now, he noted. The Indian was being carried away, and Clay was watching, his pink face hard.

Sam said, "You've got my gun. . . . You say your redskin don't carry a weapon, huh? . . . Because you frisked him, maybe?" He made a sudden motion. From between his shoulder blades he whipped out a Bowie knife a foot long. His right hand caught Kildeen's white shirt, his left thrust the knife's point at the gunman's throat. Jack Timber roared with laughter.

Kildeen froze. There was no fear in him, Sam saw, only rage at being outwitted. Jubal Clay came on silent feet and said, "Really, gentlemen, I can't have it, you know. My clientele. . . ."

Jack said, "You've got my forty thousand. . . . Your Injun packs a knife. . . . Your man is too fresh. . . . We'll leave, however—because it is beginning to stink in here!"

They left amidst profound silence. They walked back to their hotel in silence. Jack Timber was broke again. . . . Sam thought it all over, his hand going to the money in his belt, to the gun Clay had restored to him. . . .

IN the morning Sam had come to a decision. He looked at the big man on the bed alongside him and smiled. Jack slept like a little child, with no nightmares to trouble him. He had said only that the others in the game had topped him. He shrugged, "When you're topped with good hands, you run outa chips soon. . . . Poker's a game you got to play accordin' to the cyards you hold."

Sam forebore to answer this, but in the morning light, he still knew he was right. He played poker according to the cards the *other* fellow held. . . . Jack was a sorry gambler unless luck was running his way, when his plunging would count heavily. . . .

He left Jack sleeping and went down and had breakfast. The city spread before him, on the scarred hillside the Comstock produced the gold which affected the history of a nation. . . . He hired a horse and rode up to have a look at the big hole. . . . It was too tremendous for his cattleman's mind to reason it out. He accepted it as a phenomenon and dismissed it.

He was riding back when he met the girl. She was on a spirited bay, and she was riding astride, in a daring split skirt. . . . She turned her grey eyes on him and

She had shucked all of them men's clothes and whipped up a dinner to make you drool. She spurred the bay before he could reply and was off.

spoke clearly, "You brought me luck last night. I'd like to know your name."

"Sam Hill, from Texas," he told her. "Thank you, ma'am."

She smiled and her face became youthful and attractive beyond any he had ever seen. "I'm Carolyn May. . . . I own a hat shop in town."

He said, "You're a good gambler, Miss May."

She sobered. "I wish I were. . . . Last night . . . but never mind that. Could you lunch with me? I'd like to repay you a little."

A warning bell sounded in Sam's inner depths. This charming, lovely girl who sold hats but gambled for thousands did not make sense. Why should she lunch with a cowboy from Texas? . . .

He said, "Why, Miss May, my boss will be lookin' for me. If I can arrange with him, I'd be happy. . . ."

"Bring him along," she said. "He's a huge man, isn't he?"

"Best there is," Sam said.

"At the International," she nodded. "Say one o'clock?" She spurred the bay before he could reply and was off. His hired hack could not come within half a mile of her. . . .

He returned the horse and found Jack in the bar. The big man said, "Seen enough? We gotta go home and borrey some money an' start over. . . ."

Sam hesitated. The money in his belt was beginning to burn. Jack had been a wonderful boss to him. . . He temporized. "A right pert filly invited us to lunch. I won a couple hundred . . ." he choked over the lie, but went bravely on . . . "playin' roulette last night. She coppered me an' won a fistful."

"Why, you lil ole rascal!" Jack said admiringly. "Picked up a gal, huh?"

They had a drink, called a "cocktail," rather sweet, but potent. Shaking their heads over this new wonder, they strolled to the imposing International at which they had been too timid to stop. They stood, all hands and feet, in the dining room. A waiter came and said, "Miss May is expecting you. . . ."

They followed his stiff back to a table set with bright silver and snowy napery. The girl wore a dress of some clinging material and twinkled merrily up at Jack. She seemed a girl of many moods. . . .

They sat and ate . . . wonderful viands, delicately served. It was high living, all right. . . . The girl chatted about Virginia City, about the mines, the stock manipulations, about the great men who had made the top money. . . .

Sam said quietly, "Makin' money ain't such a trick. Keepin' it is the stunt. . . ."

Jack guffawed. "He means me, Miss May. . . . I'm a prodigal."

THE girl became deadly serious. She said, "You were bucking Joker Jackson . . . I've got to tell you. Jubal Clay is a man with a stainless reputation. All Virginia City respects nim. But Jubal Clay has Kildeen and Joker Jackson working for him—and they are crooked."

Jack Timber's face set into hard lines. He said, "You mean I was cheated?"

"Don't be too hasty," the girl said. "I know Joker is a short carder . . . because my brother lost every dime we owned

and left me a debt to pay . . . in poker games with Joker Jackson, games which Jubal Clay allowed in his rooms. I can't prove it, but I believe he was cheated. My brother was Handy May."

Sam said, "I've heard of him. A great poker player, a square gambler."

"He died," she said, her face showing deep pain. "He took a drink in Clay's place—and died. The doctor thought he was poisoned by food. . . ."

Sam said, "Wait. . . ." There was a screen, from behind which waiters passed to and fro with trays. It was quite near the table where the three sat. Sam moved on the soft soles of his boots, going swiftly. He jerked the panel of the screen aside.

Joker Jackson lurched into view. Sam caught him by the elbow, slammed him into a chair so quickly that no one noticed the maneuver. The girl stared hotly at the scar-faced man.

Jack Timber said, "Down home, we'd hang this galoot outa hand. . . . What you reckon, Sambo?"

"Listeners don't hear no good of themselves," said Sam. "Mebbe we ought to shoot him right here. Sure would add excitement to the place."

"Noooo . . people'd talk," said Jack judiciously. "We better take him outside an' quietly cut him to pieces."

The girl's eyes bored at Jackson. She said, "Last night I paid off your boss. You don't have to spy on me any longer. . . . Unless there's some other reason besides the debt my brother left!"

Jackson's scar had become livid, his face contorted with rage. He growled, "You waddies go back to your cows. . . . We'll attend to you later, Miss May. . . ."

"His ears," said Jack complacently. "Big, ain't they? We could put 'em on the wall 'longside that elk head."

Joker slid out of the chair like an eel. Sam's gun thrust its snout promptly from beneath the white cloth. Clay's man said, "Go ahead and shoot. . . . See what it gets you. I'm walkin' outa here, see?"

He walked out. Sam put away his gun and said, "A very sudden hombre, ain't he? Quick, like."

"Dangerous," said Carolyn May. "I know you won some money last night, Mr. Hill. The croupier at that table is honest. His name is Donner. That wheel is the one all those in the know play at. I'm warning you—get out of town before anything happens."

Sam said slowly, "But you don't want us to drag our lines. . . . You got somethin' up yore sleeve."

Jack Timber said, "If they cheated me outa forty thousand. . . ."

The girl leaned forward, her vivid face bright. "They short-carded you, Mr. Timber. I *know* they did. . . . They poisoned my brother. . . . Yet Jubal Clay seems honorable and is respected. There is somthing wrong about the place. No one in Virginia will touch it . . . not anyone in authority. The take in Clay's establishment is over $5,000 per day, I happen to know. . . . If I were a man, I'd find out about it."

Jack said slowly, "We might could raid 'em. . . . But that'd only get us in bad. We ain't very slick. Still . . . my forty thousand is in Clay's bank, by now. . . ."

Same said, "Jack, how about stirring around and findin' some Texans? Ask questions. Learn what you can about Clay . . . I'll talk to Miss May."

"Yup," said Jack, disentangling his huge form from the tablecloth which folded about his legs. "Might be we could hang around . . . seein' as Sam is holdin' stake money. . . ." He nodded to them and walked out of the hotel restaurant into the lobby.

SAM said, "He's a great cattleman, but no card player. . . . How do you reckon they work their cheat?"

"Signals," she said promptly. "My brother couldn't be fooled by markers or holdouts or mechanical tricks. Joker or Clay . . . or some other combination . . . signaling each other."

"One man can't beat that," nodded Sam. "An' Jack ain't the kind to go in with me. . . . Well, Miss May, we got a stake in Clay's place. . . . And might be we could find out about your brother

while we're lookin' into things. . . . What do you want out of it!"

She said tautly, "I paid back twenty thousand dollars . . . part in stock which has trebled since they took it from me. I want a chance to help . . . and to get back some of my own."

"You are mighty determined," said Sam. "Meet us at Clay's tonight. . . ." He added judiciously, "You are mighty pretty, too. I ain't much of a ladies' man, but I can say that!"

She sat back and a look almost prim came upon her. She said, "I do not encourage men, Mr. Hill."

"I'm right glad to hear it," he nodded. He knew enough to get up, then, and take his leave. He failed to note that Carolyn May blushed very becomingly behind his back. . . .

He went off the main stem and down to the shacks of the miners, wandering, hoping Jack would not get into any trouble. Jack was all for direct action, and would gladly go down to Clay's and take his money at point of a gun, with horses waiting to make a run for it. But Jack had a bull-like way, and getting information skilfully was not his long suit. . . .

He had ideas of his own, however, which he wanted to deal with in his way. He came to the last cabin on the last street in town and peered at a man reclining in the shade, pipe in mouth. He said, "How?"

The man removed the pipe, watching Sam's hand make the Indian sign. He wore miner's clothing, but his copper skin gave him away. A fat squaw came curiously to the door, then disappeared. Sam said, "You get rich in mine?"

"Mebbeso," said the Indian.

Sam said, "Ten dollars says no."

The Indian stretched out a none-too-clean hand. Sam gave him a gold piece. He said, "You know Montez? Injun?"

The reclining man spat expressively. "*Mechanico* . . . Reech, like white man."

"He connected with the mines here?" asked Sam casually.

"Ugh," negated the Indian. His beady eyes gleamed. "Him connected nothing. Nobody. Him big heap smart."

"I don't cotton to him neither," said Sam. "Tell me all you know."

It was not much, but it helped. *Señor* Montez, obviously a full-blooded Indian, had a white wife, a home on the Hill, pockets lined with gold. He sneered at other Indians, dispensed no charity among his own race. He dressed like a fop, was seen in all the best places in Virginia City, with his blond squaw, gambled inordinately, drank the finest wines.

He did not gamble at Clay's more often than other places, but always seemed to lose there. He never divulged the source of his wealth and no one had yet guessed whence it came. . . .

Sam said, "Many thanks. . . . You no talk?"

"You get Montez," said the Indian flatly. "Me laugh."

SAM went away from there. Again he traversed the town, to an even meaner section. There were not many Mexicans at this altitude, the mountain natives preferring to remain at home. But he found the inevitable wanderer, named Manuel. He spent another coin. He learned exactly nothing about Montez that the Indian had not already told him.

Still, that in itself was progress, so he was not unhappy. He went back to his hotel and up to his room to wash. He opened the door with the key . . . there was a rustle of air within. . . .

Something impelled him to thrust the door inward, then step back. A missile hissed in the air. A knife flew over his shoulder and clanged against the plaster of the hall wall. He ducked promptly and dived inside his room.

It was empty. The window was open and the shades raised, but there was no one in the room. . . .

He threw himself sideways. A bee seemed to buzz and the plaster in the hall took another beating. Far away, but not too far, the report of a rifle mingled with the hurly burly noises of Virginia City, entirely unnoticed by anyone save the one who fired it . . . and Sam Hill.

Same crawled back into the hall. Jack Timber came up the stairs and stared in

amazement. Sam said, "Stay where you are. . . . They are firing at us from that building across the street. Go down and have our room changed to the inside."

Jack protested, "No air in them inside rooms."

"No bullets, either," said Sam dryly. "Go on, while I try to snake our baggage out. . . ."

There were no further attacks, and he made the move without injury. Jack came in and sat down on the bed and said, "I've met men in this town swear Jubal Clay is regular . . . Texas men, bankers, lawyers. . . . Somehow, though, I got the idee it was a ticklish subject. Like they wanted to side Clay . . . but knew somethin' was fishy."

"That was right smart of you to figger that out," said Sam. "Mebbe Clay is all right."

"Then who slickered Miss May's brother? And me?"

Sam said, "We only got her word for it May was cheated. We got nobody's say-so you was cheated—except hers and she was playin' roulette alongside me while you got rooked."

Jack said, "Sho! You don't think the gal lies?"

"This is a big town," said Sam. "You and me, we're country folks. These people are different than us. There is more money here right now than we ever dreamed of afore. It makes things set up so that people are affected by it. Mebbe Miss May imagines things."

Jack said, "If I wasn't cheated, leave us go home an' start work to get even. If I was, leave us start some action."

"We're goin' back to Clay's tonight," said Sam. "If it's all right by you, boss."

Jack scratched his head. He looked up at the ceiling, down at the floor. Then he said, "Sam . . . I b'lieve in admittin' when I'm outa my depth. You seem to git along here better'n me. You won money last night . . . I ain't askin' how much. Supposin' you take over from here on, an' don't call me 'boss' no more."

Sam said, "Pardners?"

Jack said, "That's about it. . . . I need you bad, Sam. No matter what comes outa this . . . pardners, huh?"

Sam said, "I'm proud, Jack. But I'll pay my way. . . ."

It was something to think about. Jack really did need him. Mary herself had said so, privately, begging Sam to watch over the reckless big man. There had been no hurry about it before, but Sam felt a little diffehent about things today. He was glad Jack had made him the generous offer. . . .

Carolyn May could have been lying. But she could have been telling the truth, too, he thought. . . .

AT DUSK the city waked to new and louder sounds as a particularly wild crowd of miners came in and drank themselves into an uproar. There were several fracases in the streets and bistros. A gloomy foreboding pervaded the town's more peaceful citizenry.

A boy came to the hotel where Sam and Jack drank beer preparatory to the night's excursion. He bore a note which he delivered, then disappeared as though by magic. Sam read the scribbled lines, "Don't come near Clay's again. . . . They're after you. . . . Remember Handy May. . . . No matter what, don't come here." It was signed "Donner."

"The croupier," Sam explained to Jack. "Miss May said he was honest. Probably a friend of her brother who died." He told Jack of Handy May's doubtful exodus.

Jack said, "Funny how everybody claims Jubal Clay is personally on the level."

"Someone was shootin' at me," said Sam. "Someone threw a knife a helluva ways."

Jack said, "Course I sort of hit that Montez kinda hard. He had a stiletto."

"Uh-huh," said Sam. "Wonder what Donner found out?"

"We got to go down to Clay's to find out," said Jack.

"Ain't it the truth?" Sam said. "Miss May will be there."

They went first to a saloon with a bar a hundred feet long and had another

The two of them were drunk and ugly-tempered. Jack didn't waste time on them, but banged their heads together like two coconuts.

beer. James Fair was there, buying for a crowd. They looked upon this millionaire and found him as other men, save for whiskers . . . The same small boy darted in, handed another enveloped to Jack, vanished. "Quickest little feller I ever seen," said Jack. He opened the envelope. A single sheet of heavy paper contained some lines scrawled in heavy black ink.

"Please ignore the events of last evening and have another try with us. Am very sorry you were annoyed by *Senor* Montez. We will welcome you if you care to play again . . . Clay."

Jack said, "Huh! A trap, you reckon?"

"Could be," said Sam. "Looka that paper. Expensive stuff, huh? Got his name printed on top . . . Jubal Clay. Fancy!"

Jack said, "People is anxious to have us go down to his place, or stay away from it. People is anxious to kill us or help us. We got to be some punkins in this here big city."

"Looks like we might get to be corpses in this big city," Sam said. "Reckon we ought to climb that train and get towards Texas. We *ought* to."

Jack drank his beer. "They say there's a gal show across the way. Men might as well die happy. Let's go."

The gals were not beautiful and rather elderly and neither Texan enjoyed them, but the comedian had a red nose and baggy pants and they thought him very funny. At ten o'clock they had seen it all and were on the streets again.

"Sam said, "I guess you know there has been a little Mex hombre followin' us all evenin'."

"Yeah," said Jack. "Should I ketch him for you?"

"Naw," said Sam. "He's just workin' at a job. It's about time to go to Clay's place."

A bevy of drunk miners shoved along, almost knocking Sam into the gutter. They were ugly-tempered, pausing to argue. Jack reached out and took two of them and banged their heads together like two cocoanuts and Sam showed his gun and the miners went away, except the pair who lay on the walk where Jack dropped them.

"Rough town," said Jack, shaking his head. "Somethin' doing' every minute . . . Too many folks in this yere place, Sam."

"The Mex quit followin' us," said Sam. "Let us go into Clay's by the back way, or some way beside the front, huh?"

The building which housed the famed gambling establishment was discreetly lighted and around it was a pool of silence, perhaps in awe of its prestige. Sam led his big companion down alongside the north end of the place. He whispered, "Clay had an office—where Miss Clay paid him off last night. It was some place this side."

There was a window, partly opened, high off the ground. Jack squinted at it, then put his back to the wall and made a stirrup of his locked hands. Sam gave a little run, put his toe in the offered grasp and felt himself tossed into the air as lightly as though shot from a gun.

He grabbed the sill, hung a second, then scrambled up. He lifted the window and went over and into a darkened room. He waited for his eyes to get accustomed to the blackness, then moved toward a sliver of light issuing under a door. He worked around the wall until he was satisfied that this was indeed an office.

He leaned precariously out the window and said, "Percolate a little, Jack, until I can slip you in somewheres. Try the back."

He prowled back, wondering what was on the other side of that door, if it led into the main room, or if there was an ante room. His foot, thrusting cautiously forward, struck something which gave, but was sodden to his touch.

HE FROZE. He reached into his pocket and drew out a match. Cupping his hands, he crouched, striking the taper. He got one glimpse of the pinched, pale features of the man on the floor. He blew the match out softly and hunkered there, thinking.

It was Donner, all right. His throat

had been slit. He was dead. He had written a warning note to Sam and someone had killed him.

Then someone, ostensibly Clay, had written another note inviting Jack and Sam to come and gamble in this place . . . Even to a simple cow hand, this seemed fairly obvious. He shifted his gun to a handier position in his belt and went firmly to the door.

He was aware then, of a change. He hesitated, hand on the latch. For a second or two he was unaware of a nagging difference in the room. Then he knew that it was the small trickle of light which had come beneath the door. It was gone.

He opened the portal with a firm hand. There was more darkness, another room, but this one was narrow, like a corridor. He explored it with his fingers on the walls.

There were three doors. Beyond one was the familiar sound of gambling, low voices, chips clicking, wheels whirring. The other two were at opposite ends of the narrow chamber. He chose the one to the rear and tried it. A look resisted him, but he took his Bowie from between his shoulders and carved lustily until it gave way.

There was a lamp burning on a table. Sam's gun was in his right hand, his knife in the left. He stood there, staring.

Bound to a straight chair, gagged with a silk kerchief, was Carolyn May. Across the room, on the floor, similarly trussed was a man. Sam leaped into action, cutting the girl free, catching her off the chair, examining her for wounds.

In his ear she whispered, "Something has happened that I do not understand . . . Jubal Clay asked me into his office—and I was seized, the lights went out and they dragged me in here. There are several of them . . ."

Sam said, "Who's that over yonder?"

"I don't know," she said. "I couldn't see."

Sam said, "Does this door lead out back?"

"I think it does," she said. "Why should they attack me?"

"I don't altogether know," said Sam. "But I'm beginning' to get an idee. Someone's been flamboozlin' all these slick city folks, for sure." He opened the rear door and emitted a low whistle. In a moment Jack Timber swaggered out of the dimness and entered the room.

"Who's the victim?" asked Jack, nodding toward the man on the floor.

"I dunno," said Sam. "But I got a hunch." He went over and turned the man on his back. The light of the lamp fell across a pink and white face.

"It's . . . it's Jubal Clay!" cried Caronly May.

Sam bent closer. "He's bad hurt . . ." He removed the gag, the ropes from the small man's wrists and ankles. Clay's eyelids fluttered and he attempted to speak. "Danger . . . bad . . ."

THE MAN'S discoloration was unnatural despite the mauling he had received. There was a faint, acrid odor to his breath, and Sam shuddered. Jubal Clay said, "No use . . . They forced me . . . All the way . . . Always tried to be a gentleman, y' know . . ." He seemed to regain a modicum of strength. He said clearly, "It has been hell to live, gentlemen. I do not regret dying . . . But if you can right the wrongs committed through my inability to cope with these people, I will know it, even in my grave."

He seemed to be finished with that. Sam said, "Who? How many of them? Is there any proof of anything?"

Jubal Clay's head wagged once. His mouth opened, closed firmly, as though he wished to die with some dignity. He breathed deeply once then was still.

"Poisoned," said Carolyn. "Like my brother. Who is doing this? It is impossible that Kildeen and Joker Jackson could. . . ."

Sam eased the dead man's head to the floor. He said, "Did they make you drink anything, Miss May?"

"No," she said. "Oh, no!"

Sam said, "You're lucky. . . . Clay must've been gettin' ready to fight 'em. Sent that note to us, thinkin' we might help on account of Jack's losses last

(Continued on page 74)

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

WHEN a man for his own stubborn reasons has made up his mind to marry a girl to whom he has never spoken and whom he has seen only at a distance, it is downright disconcerting to meet up with the chosen young woman when she is in the act of stealing one of his finest calves.

Cynthia Callan had put her string on the bawling, whiteface calf. When Arthur (Dude) Shannon rode up over the knoll she was in the act of experly "walking" down the rope. The neatly lassoed baby beef was kicking alongside a sticky scrub of thorn bush and cholla cactus.

The calf's bawling prevented the girl from hearing Dude's taffy-maned palomino stepping in the dry and dusty sand. It gave Dude Shannon several seconds to study Cynthia Callan at close range. He was vastly more interested in the girl herself than in the evidence that she must be about to put the wrong brand on a whiteface calf that had strayed from his own extensive herd.

"Slim" Pelky, the Shannon foreman, long and leathery and as tough as they made them, was riding a few paces behind Dude. Slim looked, shrugged his shoulders and rubbed a sudden grin off

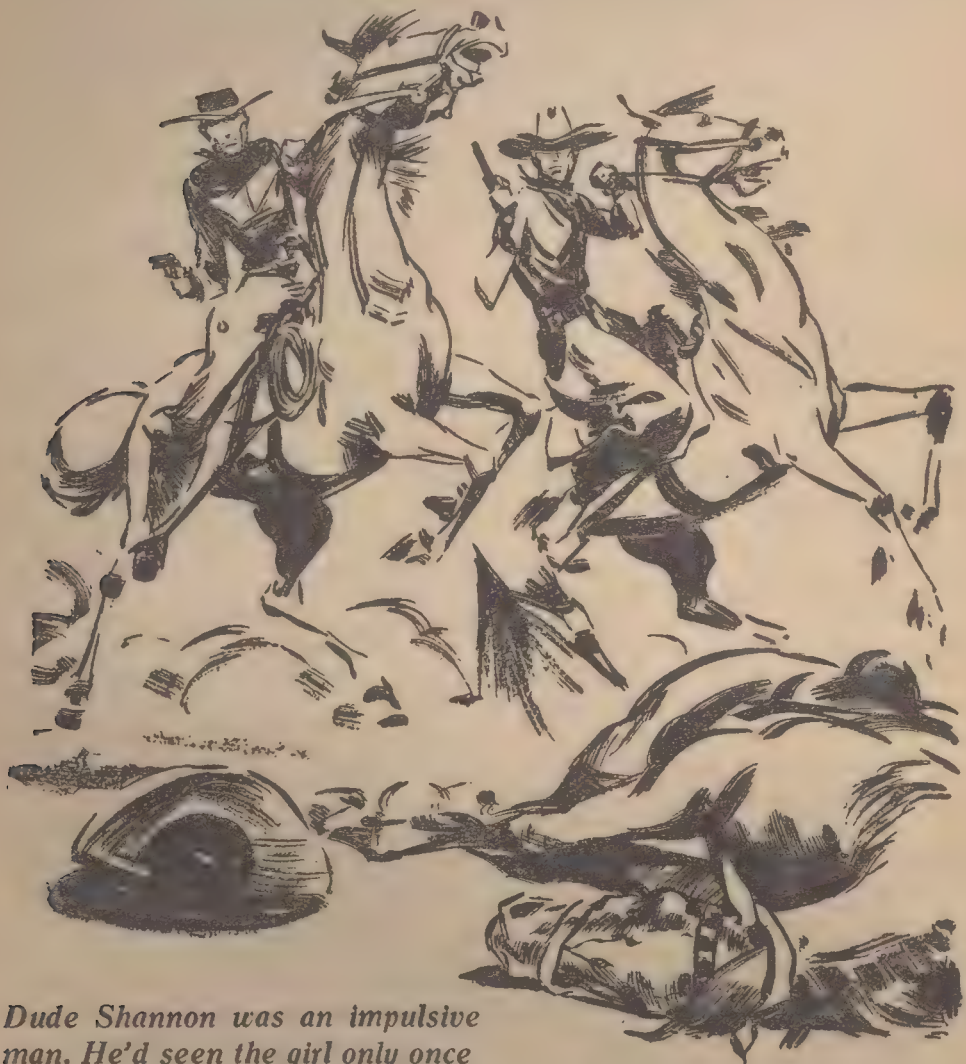
The barrel cracked against Dude's forehead and he went down. And that was enough to bring the two riders up.

LONG SLEEP CREEK

his thin-lipped mouth. He pulled up short a little behind Dude and waited.

BEFORE he spoke, Dude had the chance to see that Cynthia Callan was a heap prettier close-up than she had seemed at a distance. A man's wool shirt, faded overalls, and old riding boots could not detract from the girl's graceful slimness.

Her hair was like the taffy-colored mane of Dude's palomino, only it was more golden. It was fluffed about an oval face that was painted by the sun to a



Dude Shannon was an impulsive man. He'd seen the girl only once and never spoken to her except to quarrel with her—and yet he took the occasion to declare his intention of marrying her! Her answer was her quirt in her face . . .

tanned attractiveness that Dude Shannon didn't believe could be equaled.

However, all of this appeal failed to keep Dude's eyes off the running iron stuck into the boot of the girl's saddle. And in the law of the cow country this made the business of wrong branding the stray whiteface very bad indeed.

Slim Pelky had been with the boss some five years now, so he waited for the explosion. Maybe Dude would notice in time what his keen-eyed foreman had marked, but Slim had humor enough to want Dude to see it first.

Dude Shannon lacked the range-wise eyes of his foreman. But he didn't break into the rage that Slim Pelky had expected or Slim would have put in the right word.

Dude's voice was slow and deep, and it never had been slower and deeper than now, as he turned the girl's face toward him with his speech.

"I see you're right handy with the rope, Miss Callan," and Dude employed the clear Eastern accent that had stayed with him for nine years here in Cholla Valley.

The girl's eyes were big and brown and startled as she looked up. She showed a flash of white teeth in a smile, and for a space Slim Pelky guessed everything would be all right. But Cynthia Callan suddenly shrugged her shapely shoulders, then her red lips tightened.

"Reckon I've allus been right pert with a lass string," she drawled out. "Maybe it was how I was brung up."

Slim Pelky swallowed hard and looked away across the valley without speaking. He could see that Dude Shannon was jolted some by the girl's bold impudence. Cynthia Callan's voice had an inflection altogether out of keeping with her cleanly lined face.

Dude's next words caused Slim Pelky to scrooch down some in his deep saddle. A desert storm couldn't have been more devastating.

"You are aware of course, Miss Callan, of what you were about to do," said Dude with a sort of fatherly note. "You know that putting your dad's JC iron on my calf could put you in a very difficult position. However, do you know what I'm going to do, Miss Callan?"

Slim Pelky clung to the horn of his saddle with a desperate grip, wishing he had spoken up when he should, but it was too late now.

The girl's firm, brown hand was still upon the rope holding the calf. Her mouth became a straight slash. But her voice still drawled.

"An' what's the hifalutin' owner o' the DS have it in mind to do? Thinkin' o' drowndin' me in *Long Sleep Creek?*"

Dude Shannon's sun-reddened face suddenly grew a little redder. But he spoke now with all the kindliness of one who wished this uncouth girl of the small JC spread to understand that he was being a magnanimous and charitable neighbor.

"Well, Miss Callan, I am making you a gift of that calf. I'll have my foreman here build a fire and run the brand for you. You see, that will make it all right and legal. Otherwise, it might appear strange that a whiteface showed up running the range with your dad's black cattle."

John Callan's mountain bench ranch was small. The old man had taken over the spread only a few weeks before. The JC had scrubby feed watered by a few small springs and could never amount to much more than a bare living off beef raising.

Dude Shannon's big Cholla Valley ranch was the largest in Job's Basin county, with its five dammed, impounded lakes and its several thousand whitefaces. Moreover, Dude Shannon had sunk more than a hundred thousand of inherited money into his DS iron, and had polished off his last few thousands by building and furnishing a ranchhouse with the best of everything he could buy and have freighted from the East.

Dude had seen this Cynthia Callan riding at a distance several times. And Dude had become obsessed of an idea that would have left Slim Pelky, his foreman, speechless. But Slim Pelky didn't know of this now.

FOR half a minute after Dude Shannon had spoken, the girl stood facing him, her boyish figure rigid and her eyes on fire. And then she laughed in a manner that put Slim Pelky's teeth on edge.

"Sure 'nough, Dude Shannon?" The girl's voice held a nasal twang. "Yuh mean yuh'll gimme the calf an' yuh won't be holdin' it agin dad or me?"

"I don't usually make idle promises," stated Dude gravely. "I've been thinking perhaps I could lend the JC a hand up, seeing you might be having a difficult time of it before the Fall rains come."

The girl's brown hand was gripped more firmly about the rope holding the calf.

"Seein' yuh put it thataway, mister, I'll take yuh up on it an' yuh kin have yore ramrod run the iron as yuh say."

Slim Pelky started to speek up then, but Dude said: "You'll brand the calf for Miss Callan, Slim. Then we'll forget that this unfortunate affair took place."

Slim got off his horse and started raking dried brush together for the branding fire. The girl suddenly bent down and put piggin' strings on the calf's legs.

Dude Shannon dismounted and walked over, edging away from Slim Pelky. The idea that had been building strangely inside him ever since he had been seeing Cynthia Callan riding about came to the fore.

Slim Pelky listened and shivered. A cow waddy never had a better boss than this same Dude Shannon. That Dude had come by his money the easy way, and used all of it to make him the cattle king of Cholla Valley might have been plumb foolish, but Slim Pelky knew Dude as a kind man, quick to anger, but fair.

Moreover, Slim Pelky and Dude's other riders had a notion at times that Dude was a little touched. Whatever Dude wanted he got. And Dude had wanted some of the damnedest things that had ever been brought into tough Job's Basin county.

A grand piano was but one of the Dude's fancies that had to be hauled in parts a hundred miles from the railhead. Dining room fittings, with dishes and silver that cost enough to have paid for a small spread were other items.

But in his wildest imaginings, Slim Pelky could not have predicted what was now in Dude Shannon's impulsive soul.

Slim Pelky was fast and in but a little time the hot iron had run a JC on the whiteface calf. During this time Cynthia Callan and Dude Shannon stood apart from each other and neither spoke.

Slim Pelky jerked off the piggin' strings and the rope.

With a lithe movement the girl was over beside her pony. She faced around. Slim Pelky watched Dude Shannon go over and stand close to the girl. Then Slim Pelky bowed his head as the slowly spaced words of Dude Shannon made up the most locoed proposal any man ever had heard.

"I am wanting you to understand, Miss Callan, that I think you're almighty pretty and sweet," said Dude Shannon. "A girl with your beauty has a right to be given a chance. I am planning to send you to a big eastern school, and within two years or so you'll be a young woman this county can be proud to know."

Slim Pelky glanced up at the drift of rolling desert clouds, with a thunderhead here and there. His boss was inviting the lightning, he was sure of that. But Cynthia Callan bowed her head suddenly.

"Mister—Dude Shannon—yuh ain't meanin' such," she stammered. "Pa hisself says yuh'll be owin' Job's Basin county 'fore folks knows what's happened. Mister, yuh think some learnin' would make me like yuh say?"

DUDE SHANNON was a big man physically. He went close to two hundred, but he was tall, black-haired and as good-looking as they come. He drew himself up now.

"Certainly I mean what I say, Miss Callan," he said. "I've seen you several times, and I am planning to make my Cholla Valley ranch an empire to itself. I want the right woman in my home. One who knows this country and has

been given the advantages of all the East can give her."

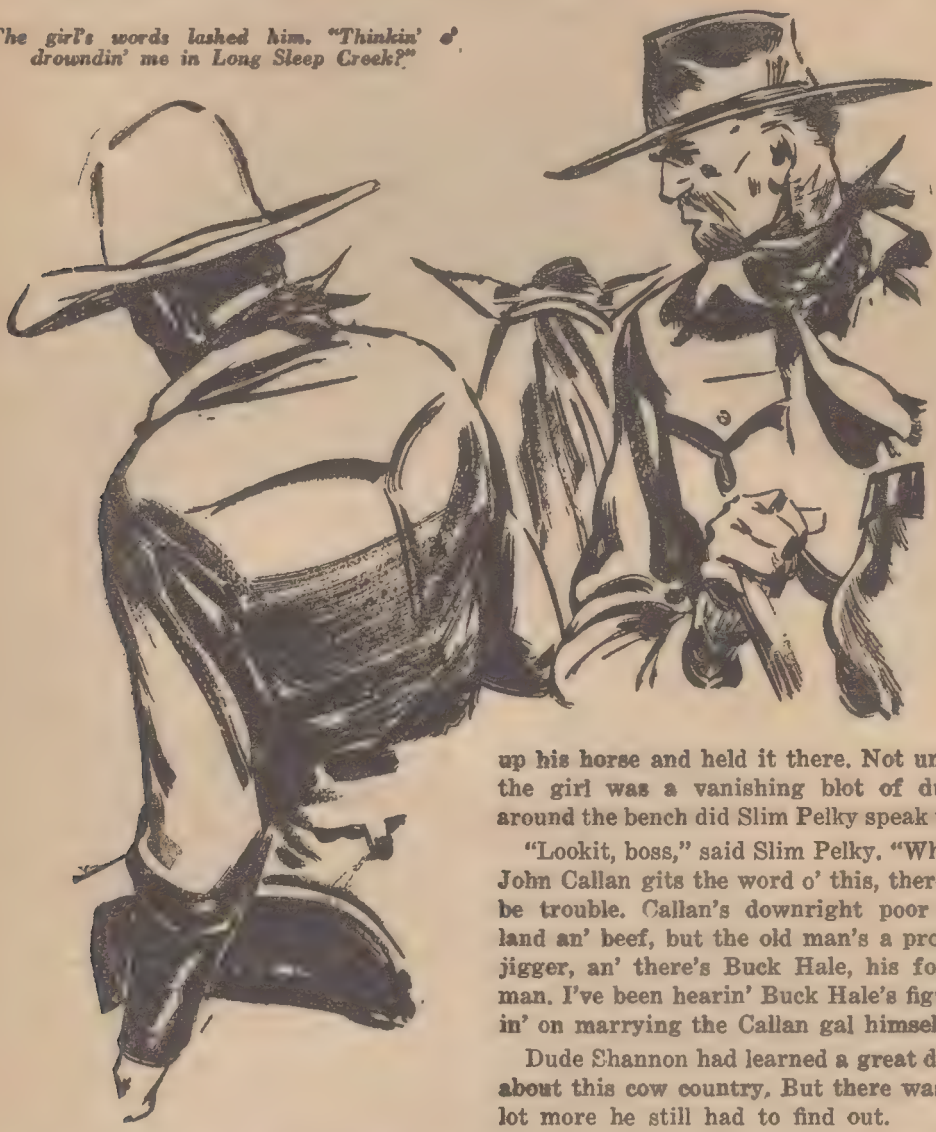
Slim Pelky's mouth was hanging open and he couldn't seem to close it. The girl's mouth had relaxed some, but her tanned, round throat fluttered as if she were trying to find words that couldn't be made to come from her stricken tongue.

"Do you understand what I am trying to say, Miss Callan?" went on Dude putting out one hand and touching the girl's arm. "I am meaning that you are to become my wife. I intend to marry you and by that time the DS ranch will be the biggest and the richest in all of Utah or any other state."

Cynthia Callan was off the ground and in the saddle as lightly as if the wind had blown her there. Slim Pelky couldn't tell from the way she looked whether the girl wanted to kiss Dude Shannon or kill him.

Then the girl drawled out her answer.

"I've heered on gals bein' drug from home an' hitched to galoots what wanted 'em to do the work o' squaws, but I ain't never heered o' any lowdown, duded-up pole cat ever tryin' to buy hisself a gal with a calf! Now git outta my way, an' if that damn' whiteface shows up on the



The girl's words lashed him. "Thinkin' o' drowndin' me in Long Sleep Creek?"

JC spread yuh kin figger Pa Callan will come a shootin'!"

It seemed to Slim Pelky that Dude Shannon was driven back a step by the girl's fierce speech. But it wasn't far enough for Cynthia Callan to miss with the riding quirt she slashed across Dude Shannon's face.

Then she whirled her pony and sent it on the dead run across the bench toward the JC home buildings some two miles away.

Dude Shannon stood there rubbing the welt along his cheek. Slim Pelky caught up his horse and held it there. Not until the girl was a vanishing blot of dust around the bench did Slim Pelky speak up.

"Lookit, boss," said Slim Pelky. "When John Callan gits the word o' this, there'll be trouble. Callan's downright poor in land an' beef, but the old man's a proud jigger, an' there's Buck Hale, his foreman. I've been hearin' Buck Hale's figurin' on marrying the Callan gal himself."

Dude Shannon had learned a great deal about this cow country. But there was a lot more he still had to find out.

"I don't quite understand, Slim. I think the girl's sweet and fine, and I only made her an honorable offer of marriage. Do you think I should have overlooked her trying to steal the calf?"

Slim Pelky groaned all the way to the soles of his boots.

"Dangnation, Dude. That's what I was honin' to tell you, but you maddened the gal afore I had a chance. She wasn't rustlin' that calf. The little beast was stuck in them thorns an' she'd only roped it to drag it out. If you'd have looked, you'd have seen her pony had pulled the

calf free. Her pony's hoof sign showed that."

Dude Shannon looked toward the fading cloud of dust. Then he was stepping into his saddle. He turned the palomino up the mountain bench.

"What you got in mind now, boss?" asked Slim Pelky quickly.

"I'm aimin 'to ride up to the JC house and apologize—"

"Good grief, Dude!" exploded Slim Pelky. "Don't be doin' no such of a thing! Leave us drive this infernal whiteface home an' give that gal a chance to cool off."

Dude Shannon pulled up.

"Look, Dude," said Slim Pelky. "You got twenty thousan' acres in grass, the biggest and fattest herd o' whitefaces in the state an' a house fitted up for the governor. You come by all that on account o' money bein' left to you. You've been a lucky hombre an' us boys all swear by you. But one chunk o' lead can undo all the luck you've ever had."

Dude nodded absently. But there was a grim smile crossing his broad mouth.

"I see the sense to your advice, Slim," stated Dude quietly. "We'll drive the calf back home."

He turned his horse alongside Slim's roper. They started down the hill toward the finest and best furnished ranchhouse the county had seen since the disappearance of the earlier Spanish grandees.

Then said Dude Shannon from the corner of his mouth:

"I'm still intending to marry Cynthia Callan."

Slim Pelky couldn't think of anything to say.

CHAPTER II

Intent to Murder

SLIM PELKY pondered upon the incident of the afternoon in his wise and silent way. Excepting for having been a rich man's son and born with one of them golden spoons upon which to cut his teeth, Dude Shannon was, by Slim Pelky's measure, the salt of the earth.

Some forty-odd punchers of the DS, Dude Shannon's money-made ranch here on *Long Sleep Creek*, were of the same mind as Slim Pelky. Dude had spent thousands impounding the rains of Cholla Valley during the winter season. He had converted what had been a dusty land of catclaw, cholla cactus, and holes for snakes and prairie dogs into more than twenty thousand acres of year-round grassland.

Thousands of fattening whitefaces still had sufficient graze with the time for the year's rains still another month away. In all that had been done Dude Shannon, the Easterner, had been strictly of his own mind.

From the placing of the impounding dams to the building and furnishing of the 'dobe house with its flowering patio, Dude Shannon had put his own odd touch upon everything. Such a house had not before been seen in this southern Utah country.

The rug of the big living and dining room had come from some foreign land. It was such a rug as the cowhands walked around, not having the gall to sink their boot heels into such costly carpeting.

There was the grand piano, and there was something else.

"Yuh wouldn't reckon Dude's figurin' on gettin' us eddicated for heaven an' the golden streets," had been the first remark of one new waddy.

The remark had been called forth by the gilded harp that had been placed beside the piano. Sometimes at night the punchers would hear Dude Shannon strumming chords on the piano, but the harp never had been touched, so far as the waddies knew.

In that same room was the dining table, with sideboards of gleaming silver and rare chinaware. There were such fine white fixings for the table as to make even Slim Pelky fear he might some day be invited to eat with the boss.

Topping off all of this lavish service that appeared to be only for Dude Shannon himself, was a Frenchy cook, two Mexican maids with enough Spanish in their veins to give them blue eyes, and the gray-haired woman called Aunt Han-

He hadn't stepped back far enough to escape the lash of her riding quirt.

nah who, it was said, had been Dude's childhood nurse and now was pensioned as his housekeeper.

Yes, pondered Slim Pelky, a queer hombre was this Arthur (Dude) Shannon. The sparsely settled range and the distant town of Lone Tree had promptly named Shannon the Dude. And to everybody's surprise he liked that name and lived up to it some of the time.

Slim Pelky guessed he alone knew of this latest notion of the boss, his idea he wanted to marry Cynthia Callan, daughter of the poor benchland rancher, John Callan.

"Maybe so the boss has been chewin' on some o' this stuff," muttered Slim Pelky, turning the whiteface calf into the home pasture, and slapping the sorrel colored blossom off a weed in the grass.

That reddish weed was the loco. It would give man and beast both bellyaches and crazy minds. But Slim Pelky had learned to know that if Dude Shannon were loco, it was a form of craziness that never seemed to change once Dude's

mind was set.

"If Dude says he's hell bent on hitchin' up with the Callan gal, there's nothin' 'll change him 'ceptin' maybe a bullet in his brisket," said Slim Pelky gloomily. "Dude wants everything he has to be different and, like makin' this DS range outta dust, he's dead set on makin' somethin' out of nothin'."

Then Slim Pelky's leathery face busted wide open in a grin.

"Makin' that Callan gal over is one chore Dude ain't never gonna do, but I'll be a ring-tailed rannyhan if I'll be the one to tell 'im the why of it," said Slim Pelky.

DESERT thunderheads boiled up over the Rincons and ran dark shadows across the Cholla Valley and *Long Sleep Creek*. Slim Pelky eyed these clouds with a weather eye as he rodded a dozen waddies into the last of the Summer round-up of late calves.

Like others of the cowhands, Slim Pelky had been only a few years in Job's Basin county. Otherwise he might have read an ominous portent in the rolling billows of clouds drifting across the furnace sun.

Dude Shannon reined up sharply alongside the branding fire. This single-minded builder of a cattle empire could and did wear the fanciest of dude clothes on trips to Lone Tree, and it was known he put on a black coat and a white, boiled shirt for his supper.

But this was the other side to Dude that made him solid with the saltiest of the punchers. In levis, wool shirt and chaps, mounted on a tough blue grulla roper, Dude Shannon had learned to hold his own with some of the best tophands.

Dude couldn't quite bust a bad bronc, but that hadn't kept him from trying. Several white scars around his jaws were marks of his good intentions.

Dude was passably quick and sure with a six-gun, too. When he rode round-up with the boys he never played the boss. Slim Pelky was the ramrod, and that was that.

"I've been thinking of riding over to the Callan place and apologizing for my blundering stupidity yesterday," said Dude, pulling alongside Slim Pelky. "So I'll change out of these rough clothes and try and make friends with John Callon. Sorry, but I've never met him."

Slim Pelky screwed up his weathered face, squinting at Dude's levis and brush-torn chaps.

"In the fust place I wouldn't be rushin' too much, boss," said Slim Pelky, pushing his tongue into his cheek. "An' if you want to be plumb bull-headed, I wouldn't change into them fancy store duds."

Dude Shannon smiled and nodded.

"Might be excellent advice, Slim," he admitted.

"An' moreover an' likewise, you take my gun an' strap it on," said Slim Pelky. "Never know when you might be meetin' up with a calf-stealin'—I mean a calf-killin' coyote."

"Thanks, Slim," said Dude, but he shook his head. "This is a peaceful and neighborly mission."

Slim Pelky swallowed hard. He wanted to enlighten Dude on one thing, but he decided it was best to let it ride.

He did say: "By this time Buck Hale might o' been hearin' o' what happened yest'day, an' Hale ain't the kind to augur peaceable."

Dude Shannon laughed. He was a big man physically and any rep that might be given this Buck Hale gave him no worry. But Slim Pelky insisted upon another word.

"Buck Hale's tough, an' he's snaky when it comes to fightin', boss," stated Slim Pelky. "He ain't been so long in Job's Basin, but he's the kind o' pole cat what stomps the other fella's face with his hoot heels. Excusin' it, Dude, but you're some soft when it comes to meetin' up with Buck Hale's kind o' rawhide."

Dude Shannon laughed again. As he reined toward the benchland trail he spoke back over his shoulder.

"You might tell Aunt Hannah that it's possible, just possible I'll be entertaining guests for dinner this evening."

Then Dude Shannon turned into a dust cloud up the trail.

"If he's meanin' ol' John Callan an' his gal—Great Goshen, I'd oughtta told 'im—it'd seem right funny to some folks, but when Dude Shannon puts his teeth into somethin' he ain't got sense enough to let go—dammit! I will tell him!"

Slim Pelky had a second thought. It caused him to summon Jake Laner, the oldest waddy next to himself.

"Wantin' you should ride along with me, Jake, an' when we pick up sight o' the boss, keep your eyes peeled for every clump o' bush an' rocks," ordered Slim Pelky.

DUDE SHANNON let the horse take it easy on the climb to the bench where John Callan ran his small herd. Glancing back over the valley he could see his bunches of white faces spotted here and there along *Long Sleep Creek.*

"Double or nothing," said Dude musingly. "There's enough good beef down there to bring two thousand for every thousand I put into Cholla Valley. You'd think some other far-seeing jasper would have got the idea of impounding the Winter rains in the arroyo of *Long Sleep Creek.*"

Dude's mind turned then and he worded his sudden thought.

"*Long Sleep Creek?* The Ute Indians have imagination seeing the names they've given the things around. I wonder what the devil *Long Cleep Creek* signifies. Probably some Indian brave went to sleep there and never woke up."

Dude turned now to thinking of Cynthia Callan. This wouldn't be easy. He had made a fool of himself over that calf. He hoped the girl would have cooled off and have enough humor to see the funny side of it.

"She doesn't think I meant what I said," murmured Dude then. "I'll have to convince her and John Callan. Well, I haven't failed at anything I've tried."

THE lead thudded into the neck of Dude's horse. Dude didn't seen the blossom of gunsmoke less than thirty feet away in a clump of mesquite. The sturdy roping beast squealed, reared and went over.

The blossom of smoke had come from a clump of mesquite less than thirty feet away.

Dude landed heavily on his side, but he was quick enough to clear his feet from the stirrups. His horse rolled over, attempted to rise, and fell back.

Partly stunned, Dude scarcely realized that the splinters that stung his face and neck came from a soft shale rock crumbled by a second bullet. There could be no doubt but that this second slug had been meant for Dude himself.

Dude rolled, his vision clearing. He had climbed to his knees when he saw the long-armed, gorilla-like figure of Buck Hale. The foreman of John Callan's spread had a horsey face with a sharp nose and little eyes.

"Yuh think yuh can paw over all the women, an' put yore smart lips onto a gal what belongs to me."

Buck Hale bellowed his meaningless words as he saw that Dude was unarmed. Hale's gun was aimed for a finishing shot, but the Callan foreman evidently had sense enough to know it would be a mistake to shoot now, even though he had undoubtedly intended to murder Dude in

the first shooting of this ambush, when he believed he was armed.

As it was, Hale jammed his gun back into leather. Dude was getting to his feet when Hale took the quick advantage of being above him on the slope and jumped, feet first. The move was so unexpected and quickly made that Dude was trapped and rammed to his back with Hale's heavy boots sinking into his stomach.

The sky blurred as Dude's head smashed back upon the rocky trail. Buck Hale was roaring oaths, snatching at Dude's hair with one hand while he punched a fist into his face.

CHAPTER III

Invite to Dinner

BUCK HALE was making every effort to gouge out Dude Shannon's eye with one thumb, while still beating a fist into his face. Then Dude proved it had been something more than his money that had made the rich Cholla Valley ranch.

Dude had never before tangled with a rough-and-tumble fighter of Buck Hale's kind, the killer type. But his nine years here under the Rincons had toughened Dude more than even Slim Pelky suspected.

At the second he seemed about to fade out, Dude doubled his legs instinctively, caught Hale in the middle and kicked. Hale was thrown clear, landing behind Dude. Dizzy, but his mind clearing, Dude got to his hands and knees, turned, and surprised Buck Hale by ramming into him with all of his weight and in much the position of a butting goat.

Dude got to his feet then before Hale could stand up. Dude stepped back, waiting. Buck Hale, in his position, would have used his boots. And Buck Hale now appeared to lose his head completely, grabbing for his gun and getting it from leather.

Dude dived as the gun flamed and his shoulder was seared by the lead. But Hale swung the gun in his hand, cracking the barrel across Dude's forehead. Dude fell, not quite out, but unable to get back to his feet.

"Hold 'er, Buck! We seen enough to ventilate you permanent."

It was the voice of Slim Pelky. With Jake Laner siding him, Slim Pelky held his .45 bearing down upon Buck Hale.

"I'd oughtta bust your legs an' turn you over to the law for dry-gulchin'," rasped Slim Pelky. "Say the word, boss!"

The half minute breather brought Dude Shannon back to his feet. And Slim Pelky was looking at a new side of his boss.

"Keep out of this, Slim," commanded Dude, his voice low. "You made a mistake. Put up your gun. I'll take care of my own fighting."

Buck Hale had his eyes upon Slim Pelky and he was cursing. He had permitted his gun hand to drop. Dude Shannon's calm words and his order to Slim Pelky fooled the red-eyed foreman of John Callan.

Perhaps Hale thought Dude was desirous of avoiding a showdown on account of Cynthia Callan. Hale laughed harshly.

"'Course I'm not takin' on the whole Cholla Valley crew," leered Hale, seeing a way out of his failure to dry-gulch Dude. "But I'm warning this soft-bellied Dude Shannon to stay off the Callan range, and—"

Dude took one long stride forward, sidestepped, and snapped over a honey of a right cross that smashed Hale's lips back into his teeth. At the same instant Dude's left hand trapped Hale's gun wrist, twisted, and the .45 bounced into the rocks.

Slim Pelky and Jake Laner didn't speak and they didn't move. Once he had Buck Hale at open distance for his fists, Dude Shannon finished the fight in what would have been half of a three-minute round if there had been boxing rules.

Dude's short stabbing left and the blurring cross of his right rocked Buck Hale's head. Dude's left was suddenly buried in Hale's midriff and as the tough foreman's head was pulled down, Dude's

uppercutting right lifted Buck Hale cleanly off his heels.

"Good gravy, boss!" exploded Slim Pelky.

But another slow and heavy voice cut in. Slim Pelky groaned.

"Leave yore iron where it's layin', Hale!" ordered the long, leathery-hided oldster who had pulled up his horse beside the nighest clump of mesquite. "An' when yuh git to the house, roll yore tarp. I'm takin' care o' my own arguments."

"Yuh can't be firin' me, Callan!" There was something more than the defiance of a foreman honing to hang onto his job in Buck Hale's speech. "Yuh wantin' it talked in Lone Tree as how this high-an'-mighty eastern dude was accusin' Cynthia o' misbrandin' his beef?"

SLIM PELKY started his horse toward Buck Hale who stood there with his face cut to bloody ribbons.

"You say that agin an' I'll rope an' drag you all the way to Lone Tree!" cracked out Slim Pelky.

But Dude Shannon reached out and caught the rein of Slim Pelky's horse, backing the beast. John Callan's gun was coming from its holster then. Callan's temper fired into an oath and his gun came up and bore upon Buck Hale.

There was a rattling of loose shale on the slope. Mounted on her pony, Cynthia Callan flashed up alongside her father, catching his arm. With her hair flying and her eyes blazing, the girl cried out.

"Stop bein' locoed fools! Buck, git yore hoss an' light out 'fore yuh pay up on tryin' to back-shoot a jigger that ain't totin' an iron! Dad! I tol' yuh this hi-falutin' Dude Shannon only made a greener's mistake, an' as for you, Dude Shannon, yuh ain't showin' good sense to be ridin' up on the JC!"

If anyone had been watching Slim Pelky, it would have been seen that Slim's head was down so that a lopsided grin was hidden as he looked sidewise at old John Callan. It might also have been noted that John Callan was staring at his daughter as if he had never seen her before.

Buck Hale was making for his horse up the slope and no one made a move until the Callan foreman was mounted. Dude Shannon was standing there rubbing at the bruise which had almost closed one eye.

Buck Hale's horse scattered shale as he sent it away fast. Not until then did Dude Shannon appear to find his voice and the right words. Dude walked with a slight limp over to John Callan's horse, looking up.

"Did yuh hear what I tol' yuh, Dude Shannon?" flared Cynthia Callan. "Yuh brung all this onto yoreself! Yuh can't go around callin' folks cow-rustlers an'—"

"Please, Miss Callan." Dude Shannon held up his hand. "I was riding up to apologize for my regrettable error. I am admittin' I made a fool of myself, and on that account I'm asking that Buck Hale keep his job. I can't say I blame him and—"

Slim Pelky let his eyes wander to the line of the Rincons, as if only the desert thunderheads interested him. He had seen the beginning of a slow smile coming over John Callan's rugged face.

"Yuh mad yore excuses, Mister Shannon," cut in the girl quickly. "An' we'll be forgettin' all o' which happened yest'day. C'mon, dad. We'll be ridin' back."

Slim Pelky guessed then that Dude Shannon would have to find out several things for himself. For, to Slim Pelky's amazement, Dude Shannon smiled at the girl and John Callan.

"But I'm not wanting to forget all that happened yesterday, Miss Callan," stated Dude Shannon. "You see, Mr. Callan, I was telling your daughter yesterday that I've been making plans to marry her."

Slim Pelky didn't think John Callan would shoot down an unarmed man. But Slim Pelky was watching Cynthia Callan and he was sure that she was getting a good grip on her riding quirt.

Thus it happened that John Callan's slow speech upset all of Slim Pelky's estimate of the hot-tempered rancher.

"Cynthy was tellin' me the same, Shannon," said John Callan. "The way

(Continued on page 82)

SIX-GUN GAMBLE

"I'll likely find my Herefords dead over there," Joe snarled, seeing the down fence.

TIM O'MARA, on the prod, was like a thunderhead riding up to darken the sun-bathed New Mexico hills. Dismounting where his pard and neighbor, Joe Burnie, was starting construction on a new adobe house, the lanky Irishman wore a dark expression on his face and a Colt on his hip. Considering that Tim O'Mara was a man who wore a smile habitually and a six-shooter seldom, the signs were ominous.

"Joe," Tim grimly announced without preamble, "Ben Grute has shot an' kilt our Hereford bull, an' I'm goin' to kill Ben Grute!"

Stocky, sandy-haired Joe Burnie was

By JAMES P. OLSEN

Rancher Joe Burnie was no hand with a six-gun, and his skunkaroo enemy, Ben Grute, was a gunman who was as sharp as a tack. There had to be a showdown, because Joe wouldn't run away even though his staying would mean death—and then, suddenly, Joe Burnie discovered other ways to be literally a fighter sharp as a tack himself . . .

younger than Tim O'Mara, but more level-headed and contained. He didn't blow up, although he and Tim sweated and denied themselves equally in order to buy that blooded bull and six heifers. They'd aimed to raise breeders and improve the small range herd they ran pooled on their adjoining spreads. Loss of the bull was a hard blow, yet Joe accepted it with cold-eyed calmness and customary grave deliberation while thinking it over.

"This mawnin'," Tim irately elaborated, "I rode up-crick to see after the Herefords, an' found a section of our fence pulled down. The bull was dead, over on Grute's side of the fenceline."

"How d'you know Grute done it?" Joe questioned levelly.

"Whoinell else woulda?" Tim challenged. "Them three pulque-swillin'

'breeds who run Grute's mangy sheeps an' cattle, while he loafs in Sierrita or rides gun trails, they wouldn't've. Besides, Grute woulda wanted the fun of doin' sech a stinkin' job hisse'f!"

Joe Burnie looked at the stacks of cured 'dobe bricks, ready to form the house he and Judy Ward would occupy when it was built and they were married. Scowling uneasily, he looked back at Tim and stated, "You can't go gunnin' for Grute, Tim. He's a killer, an'—"

"When I'm crowded, I c'n be one, too!" Tim snarled.

"An' it ain't your place to deal with him," Joe went on. "We know Grute never had a chance with Judy Ward, but he hates my guts because she took up with me when I come here. Now that it's been announced that Judy an' me are goin' to be married, Grute's aimin' to raise hell with us outa sheer spite an' meanness. That's why he kilt our bull, an' so it's up to me to handle the settlin' up."

"Since yuh put 'er thetaway," Tim grudgingly agreed, "I allow the first lick's yours. But how do you aim to go about takin' it?"

"Not with a six-gun," Joe declared. "I ain't no shucks with one, an' wouldn't try makin' settlement with one if I was. That's just what Grute hopes I'll do, givin' him a chance to kill me. I b'lieve in law an' order, Tim, an' so I'm goin' to the law an' ask for an arrest of Grute, then ask for damages."

"Yuh'll ask, an' yuh'll git nawthin'," Tim snorted. "But go ahead. After yuh've wasted time, I'll try Grute in Colt Court."

Tim's truculence forbade further argument. Silent, Joe got his horse. His six-gun, a battered relic he never packed, anyhow, he left behind in his cabin when he and Tim jogged away toward the town of Sierrita. Packing a belt-gun involved risk of gunplay, Joe figured. He wished Tim would shuck his hardware.

THE silence of *siesta* hour cloaked Sierrita when Joe and Tim rode in. As they racked their horses at one edge of the plaza, Joe glanced over toward the notions-and-drygoods store where Judy Ward worked, hoping she hadn't seen them ride in. Apparently she hadn't, and Joe was glad, because he didn't want to have to tell her why they'd come to town until after things had been settled. No use worrying Judy unnecessarily, he figured. Poor kid, she'd had too many worries, anyhow, since her father'd died—and she'd had to sell their little ranch to level the debts he'd left. Grute, pestering after her, had been her biggest worry, and she feared the man.

Judy Ward wasn't the only one who was afraid of Ben Grute, who left his coyote spread for his 'breed hands to run while he stayed in Sierrita, gambling, drinking and rough-handling the dark-skinned *señoritas*. A majority of the populace feared Grute, who'd killed two men here on his own stomping grounds, and whose gun was for hire away from there. Strangers would hit town and talk to him, or he'd receive a letter, and then Grute would ride out. When he returned, he'd be well-heeled with cash and would make bragging reference to a gun-slinging job he'd done in Texas, New Mexico or Arizona. So folks in Sierrita had reason to fear Ben Grute.

Walking over to the west side of the square, Joe and Tim looked into the office of Jose Garcia, a dealer in mohair, wool and hides. As a sideline, Garcia was a deputy sheriff, the only law in that part of the county.

Finding the office empty, Tim said, "He'll be in Cojo's cantina, an' Grute'll likely be there, too. . . . C'mon."

"No gunplay, mind you," Joe admonished.

Tim grunted sourly as they headed for Cojo's. Entering, they found Garcia, his big paunch pressed against the bar, talking to the lame owner. As Tim had predicted, Grute was also in the dingy place. A glass of *aguardiente* at his elbow, a cigar between his thin lips, he sat over a game of solitaire at a table against the wall.

A big devil who affected foxed buckskin clothing and wore his black hair long and his six-gun low-and-tied, Grute

looked up and sneered at Joe and Tim.

Tim twisted his lips back at Grute, but Joe, ignoring him, stepped up to Garcia and said, "I want to swear out a warrant against Grute, there. He shot an' killed our Hereford bull."

"Eh? W'at ees thees?" Instantly unhappy and apprehensive, the deputy turned his fat face toward the man at the table.

Taking the cigar out of his mouth, Grute spat, "Damn' right, I shot the bellerin' devil. Yesterday, on the way to my sheep camp, I heard snuffun, snortun an' bawlin'. I rode up to find that Hereford had busted down the fence an' was killin' one of my range bulls. When I tried to stop 'im, he come at my horse, so I shot the damn' critter. I was on my own range, Garcia, an' within my rights, an' any sons wantin' to say diffrunt can have their dealin's direct with me."

"So I'll make 'er direct by callin' yuh a liar!" Tim erupted. "Our fence's exter strong along yuhr line. I claim yuh pulled it down, then run our bull acrost onto yuhr range an' shot 'im."

"Tim, I warned you not to start nothin'," Joe barked.

"Peace, señores," Garcia croaked. "I, the law, command eet."

KILLER'S lust fired Grute's snaky eyes as he leaped to his feet, but he made no play for his gun—partly because of Garcia, but mostly because Tim was ready to fight. Grute never tackled a man who was set for trouble if he could avoid it. No matter what gunswift edge he held, Grute preferred to wait, stack the deck all in his favor and name the time for turning the cards.

"W'y would Grute weesh to tear down the fence an' keel your bool, like you say?" Garcia arched his bushy brows at Joe.

"They ain't got no proof it was like that," Grute jeered.

Garcia eyed Joe questioningly. His expression bitter, Joe shook his head. Patently relieved, Garcia declared, "Seence there ees no proof the bool don't try to gore Grute, can be no warrant issued, an' no arrest. You geet proof, I geet warrant. Meantime, I must bid you *adios, amigos,* an' tell you to keep the peacefulness."

Garcia showed them a broad stern as he turned and waddled out. Watching him go, Tim growled, "Wal, Joe, I told yuh so."

"An' I'll tell *you* somethun, O'Mara," Grute snarled as he stepped close to Tim. "Just because Burnie's too yaller to pack a six-gun an' do his own fightin', it don't mean you can horn in for him, call me a liar an' get away with it!"

As he spoke, Grute raised his left hand and shook his finger under Tim's nose, and Joe tried to step around Tim and get between him and Grute. Driving Joe back with a hard thrust of one elbow, Tim raged at Grute, "Damn yuh, stop shakin' yuhr finger under my nose, an' draw!"

Simultaneous with the sounds of palms slapping gun-butts and leather, Grute lunged and drove the heel of his upraised left hand against Tim's chest. It was doubtful that Tim, even under the best circumstances, could have begun to have matched Grute's gun-speed. Now, staggered backward and off balance, caught flat by Grute's foul trick, he hadn't the ghost of a show. His Colt had barely cleared leather when the blast of Grute's six-shooter jarred the cantina.

Tim rocked back, teetered on his heels, dropped his Colt and pressed both hands against his chest. Shock-faced, vacant-eyed, his knees suddenly buckled and he plunged forward to the floor.

Through a little swirl of gunsmoke, Joe looked down at Tim, then up at Grute; Joe's eyes were glazed by sudden grief and the damning realization that Tim was dead. The wolfish, killer's expression on Grute's face maddened Joe. An animal cry on his lips, ignoring the Colt in Grute's hand, Joe sprang at him. Grute struck out with the six-gun, laying the barrel along Joe's forehead. Blood gushing from a long gash above one eye, stunned, Joe dropped to his knees.

"Next time we meet, you'd better be packin' a iron, or I'll give you a pistol-whippin' you won't likely live over," Grute snarled at Joe as Jose Garcia and

several townsmen came high-tailing in.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Garcia cried, "I tell you to be peaceable!"

"That loco O'Mara drawed first," Grute grunted. Looking over at Cojo, across the bar, he added, "Ain't that right? Speak up!"

Cojo gave Grute a stare of dislike. But Cojo was lame and old, and thoughtful of his own welfare. Regretfully, Cojo answered, "*Si.*"

Sleeving blood off his face, swaying on widespread legs, Joe croaked, "Grute tricked Tim, Garcia. I tried to stop things, but Tim elbowed me back. Then, Grute pulled his shovin' trick on Tim."

"I tried to stop him from drawin' an' gettin' hisself killed," Grute grunted as he went back to his table and picked up his drink.

Gripping Joe's arm, Garcia led him doorward. Regretfully, he said, "I *sabe* theengs, but w'at can I do? Notheeng! So, better now you go away from Grute. I weel have O'Mara took to the ondertaker."

WOODENLY, Joe moved through the crowd outside Cojo's and cut across the plaza toward the doctor's. From the doorway of the store where she worked, Judy Ward saw him.

A dark-haired girl with a pulse-accelerating figure, Judy ran to him, crying, "Joe, are you badly hurt? What's happened to you? What happened in the cantina?"

Before Joe could answer, the doctor emerged from his office, his kit in hand. Seeing Joe, blood streaming down his face, he came toward him, asking, "Burnie, does anyone in Cojo's need me?"

"No," Joe intoned. "Tim O'Mara's there, but you can't help him, Doc. That sneakin' Grute killed Tim, an' it was my fault!"

Judy gasped, but said nothing as they went into the doctor's office. There, preparing to attend Joe's injury, the doctor said, "Joe, if you want to talk, tell Judy what happened, go ahead."

Harsh-voiced, Joe told about the bull and subsequent events, then said, "So, y'see, Judy, it's my fault Tim's dead. If I'd been packin' a gun, I coulda sided him. I shoulda listened to him in the first place, an' known it was loco to run to the law. Now that I've learned that, it's too late to do Tim any good—but not too late for me to try to finish what he started!"

Such was Joe's bitterness, he didn't even seem to notice it when the doctor stitched the gash above his eye. Now, while the doctor fastened a bandage in place, Judy caught hold of Joe's hand and gently protested, "But, Joe, Tim's death wasn't your fault. If Tim hadn't been carrying a gun there'd have been no gun-battle. If he hadn't lost his temper in Cojo's, hadn't elbowed you away, he'd not have been killed. So you see, Joe, it couldn't be your fault."

"Mebbe not," Joe bleakly conceded. "But if I'd packed my six-gun, I could've at least've tried to've held up my end today."

"And Grute would have killed you," Judy said. "That's what he wants. If he'd seen no safe chance against both you and Tim, he'd have waited until he created a situation to his liking."

"Yeah," Joe growled, "he'd a-waited. He won't quit, Judy, so I'm goin' to get my gun an' face the son an' get it over with!"

"Nonsense!" the doctor snapped. "You're dazed from the blow and the shock of Tim's sudden death. You listen to Judy, man."

"There's the matter of the bull bein' killed." Joe persisted.

"And not a shred of proof that Grute did it illegally," the doctor said as, with a meaning glance at Judy, he turned and left the room.

Alone with Joe, Judy put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Joe," she begged, "for my sake, let Grute alone. We'll hurry our marriage. After that, I'm sure Grute won't bother us any more."

Judy's plea, the unshed tears glistening in her eyes, and the urgent yielding of her young body in Joe's arms, broke his stubborn resolve. After all, Judy and the doctor likely were right, and a long life

Joe suddenly started shaking and his stomach began to roll over as the reaction of his first killing seized him.

with Judy was better than an eternity in boothill.

Joe yielded, groaning, "All right. But I tell you now, I don't think waitin's any good. Grute won't rest until we've had 'er out."

IT WAS on a Sunday morning, some two weeks after Tim O'Mara had been buried in Sierrita's 'dobe-walled graveyard, when Judy rode out to spend the day with Joe. Throughout those two weeks, he had spent most of his time rushing the new house toward completion. He'd been able to do that because it was the slack season, and Ben Grute wasn't around to be watched out for. The day after shooting Tim, Grute had ridden off somewhere to do a paid job of killing.

Judy was surprised to find the walls up and the window and doorframes in. Going through the house, she tried to be gay as she decided how she'd place the furniture, but her gaiety was forced. Finally, unable to pretend any longer, she blurted, "Joe, you must be careful. Grute returned to Sierrita yesterday, then rode on out to his spread. Garcia brought me that news, and said to warn you."

"So?" Joe grunted. "Then I reckon I'd better go haze back any stock that mighta drifted to the fenceline. Wanta ride along?"

Getting his horse, Joe led the way eastward onto Tim's range, Joe's now, since he and Tim had been pards and Tim had no living kin. Riding through juniper and piñon, they came to a lush creekside meadow where a few steers grazed. Looking them over, Joe rasped: "Them Hereford heifers was here two days ago. Now,

they're gone, an' they didn't just drift off by themse'fs. See them tracks?"

Judy, white-faced, nodded, but said nothing as they followed the tracks of the six Herefords and a shod horse up out of the meadow and to the fenceline. There, three fenceposts and the wire between was flat on the ground, and the tracks crossed there.

"I'll likely find 'em all dead over there," Joe snarled.

"I'm going with you," Judy stated. "And don't tell me I can't."

Joe shrugged and they rode across the line onto Grute's range, following the tracks into a draw. A little ways along, it turned sharply, and they came up against a barrier of freshly cut timber that held Joe's Herefords corraled in the draw above it.

"I don't savvy this," Joe muttered. "I wonder—"

What the hell're you doin' on my range?"

Judy gave an involuntary cry. Together, she and Joe reined their horses around and faced Ben Grute, who'd slid down into the draw behind them. Hands on hips, Grute eyed Joe balefully.

"You know what I'm doin'," Joe answered flatly. "You ran my heifers up here so I'd have to come onto your range, didn't you?"

"They drifted here—likely huntin' that bull," Grute jeered. "An', since you brung Judy along to pertect you, maybe she'll help pay the fee for them grazin' on my range. It's a buck a day apiece, an' I figger they been here all the fifteen days I been gone."

"You ain't cuttin' no such rusty on me," Joe stonily stated.

Dismounting, he walked up and began pulling the brush aside.

"Damn you, Burnie," Grute snarled as he walked toward Joe, who faced the taller, heavier man with fists raised. "Since you're too yaller to pack a gun, like I warned you to, an' you got Judy here to ride herd on you, I reckon there ain't much I can do this time. So take your damn' critters an' get to hell yonderly!"

Lowering his fists, Joe turned toward the barrier. Grute hit him, then, his left fist opening the barely healed gash above Joe's eye, right fist slamming against Joe's temple. Lights and fierce pain flashing in his head, Joe went down. He gasped as Grute kicked him in the ribs, rolled away and got up, weaving dizzily. He swung a feeble blow at Grute as the latter charged him, and again Joe hit the ground. After that, Joe had no idea how many cutting blows he took, nor how many times he staggered up and was knocked down until he was unable to rise again.

"Grute!" he heard Judy scream—and heard a rifle crack.

Grute, one foot lifted to grind his boot-heel into Joe's face, jerked back as the bullet, from the rifle Judy had gotten out of Joe's saddle boot, sang over his head. Grute drew his breath in sharply. The desperate expression on Judy's face told him that she would put the next slug through him if she had to shoot again.

"All right," Grute barked. "Take your weaklin' an' get off my range. An' don't think I ain't holdin' this ag'in you, you heifer!"

Climbing out of the draw, Grute got his horse out of the scrub and rode away. Sitting up, Joe groaned, "I ain't half a man. I don't do nothin' when Grute kills Tim, an' now you've had to save my hide."

Lifting her divided skirt, Judy ripped off part of her underskirt and knelt beside Joe, using it to wipe away the blood streaming down his terribly beaten face. "Hush," she rebuked him. "Grute resorted to treachery to beat you, even though he's larger than you. He tricked you, just as he tricked Tim and other men he's killed."

Helping Joe to his feet, Judy had to lead him to his horse because his eyes were swelling shut. Tearing down the brush barrier, then, she took to her own saddle and drove the Herefords back onto Joe's range as she headed Joe for Sierrita and the doctor.

IT WAS two days before Joe could see, and two more before he left his bed in a hotel room in town. During that time,

Judy laid off from work and attended him, and she was there when the doctor let Joe get up.

Now, watching Joe's stiff progress around the room, the doctor said, "Joe, you're a lucky jasper. Your cracked rib and battered face will soon heal, and then you'll be as good as ever."

"An' what good's that?" Joe bleakly demanded.

"Joe," the doctor counseled, picking up his medicine kit, "don't think like that. Don't become embittered against yourself."

When the doctor had gone, Judy came to Joe and put her arms around him. After lightly kissing his battered lips, she said, "Joe, honey, the doctor's right—you mustn't become bitter. Why, after you sell out here and we settle somewhere else, you'll forget this."

"Sell out?" Joe laughed, and it sounded like cold wind blowing through a tomb. "Y'think I'd sell what Tim left, an' high-tail? Not me, Judy. I ain't got to the point where I'll run away from Grute."

"But we'd be better off somewhere else," Judy protested.

"Would we—knowin' that I'd rabbited? Uh-uh." Joe shook his head. "Besides, this's where I want to stay, an' where I will stay—either on top of the ground or six feet under it!"

"Then what do you mean to do, Joe?" Judy quavered.

"Right now," he answered, "I'm goin' out an' see to things on the spread. I'll likely be back in a couple of days or so."

Telling Judy so-long, Joe got his horse out of the feed barn, eased himself stiffly into the saddle and rode out of town.

Three days later, happening to be looking out through the store window, Judy saw him ride back in. Watching him rack his horse, she was relieved to see that he packed no gun. Since Joe wasn't heeled, Judy figured that he hadn't come in to have a showdown with Grute. She'd have felt less easy, had she known that Joe's old single-action .45 was in one of his saddlebags.

Crossing the plaza, Joe entered the office of Nabor Andrade, Sierrita's lawyer and justice of the peace. There, taking the chair Andrade offered, he announced, "I want you to fix me up a will."

Andrade gave Joe a shrewd glance. The lines of determination around Joe's mouth and the dull tone of finality in his voice didn't escape the lawyer. Heavily, he sat down at his desk and wrote, as Joe dictated, a will that left Joe's worldly possessions to Judy.

When the will was finished and signed, Joe arose and said, "You keep it, Andrade, until it's needed."

"You intend to go after Ben Grute?" Andrade surmised.

"Not exactly." Joe smiled bleakly. "I aim to strap my cutter on, then go where Grute is. Trust that son to do the rest!"

"Why commit suicide playing Grute's game?" Andrade demanded. "Why not challenge him to fight with rifles, or to meet you in the street, both of you with your guns already drawn? That way you might have some hope of killing that spawn of Diablo."

"Y'think Grute would accept any such challenge?" Joe hooted.

"That *cabrone*—no," Andrade sourly admitted. "But," he added, "you have no chance against him any other way. Not only is Grute lightning-fast with his pistol, but he's as sharp as a tack when it comes to pulling dirty gunfight tricks."

"Yeah, sharp as a tack," Joe echoed. Frowning, he snapped his fingers suddenly, like a man who'd remembered something or had hit on a good idea, and exclaimed, "But his sharp trickery might be the hole card I need to give as a ha'f-way even chance in the game!"

"How can that be?" Andrade wondered.

He received no answer, because Joe was leaving the office. Watching him go, Andrade shook his head and wondered if Joe hadn't gone a little loco, to think that he had a chance in a draw-and-shootout with Grute.

As for that, Joe knew how slim his chances were. But the idea that had come to him did give him a little bit or a chance, and that was a lot better than none at

(Continued on page 90)

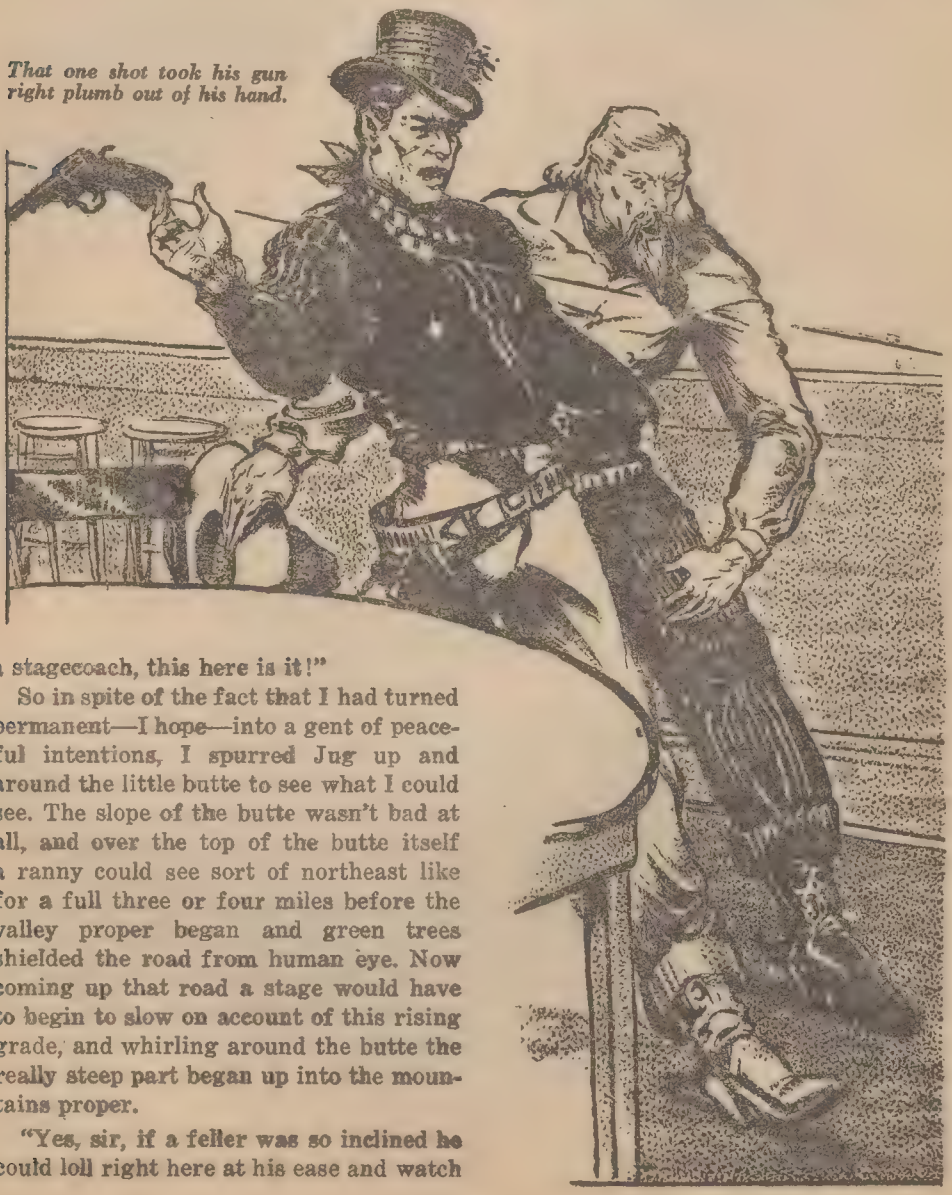
RED FOR A

WELL, SIR, it is a funny thing how a real master mechanic keeps up interest in his own work even when he is on a long vacation. The very minute I saw that butte around which the road bent on a steep grade I said to my horse, Jughead, "Jug, old boy, if ever I saw a perfect spot for holding up a stagecoach, this here is it!"

So in spite of the fact that I had turned permanent—I hope—into a gent of peaceful intentions, I spurred Jug up and around the little butte to see what I could see. The slope of the butte wasn't bad at all, and over the top of the butte itself a ranny could see sort of northeast like for a full three or four miles before the valley proper began and green trees shielded the road from human eye. Now coming up that road a stage would have to begin to slow on account of this rising grade, and whirling around the butte the really steep part began up into the mountains proper.

"Yes, sir, if a feller was so inclined he could loll right here at his ease and watch the coach come to him, rear out from behind the butte and stop it, and the butte itself would cut off all view from anybody that happened to be riding the same route from town a mile or so behind.

So I sat there admiring nature and the way she has of arranging things for a master mechanic, and twisted a quirlie,



That one shot took his gun right plumb out of his hand.

SHOWDOWN

half-regretting I was a man of peace that had decided to retire. I patted my saddle bags where I was carrying a little better than one hundred and eighty ounces of gold dust, and said, "Jug, old boy, let us put temptation behind us. We have rid many a weary mile looking for peace. You know yourself, Jug, we had to shoot up three posse men not eight hundred miles back on account of just

By WALLACE KAYTON

Even though he's completely reformed, it's hard for an old owlhooter not to recognize a made-to-order spot for a stagecoach hold-up. And, once he's seen it, his hand is bound to do a little itching

wanting to be peaceful!"

Jug didn't say anything back, which is why I like to talk to him. He just sort of snorted and pawed around the way he always does when he's anxious to get on his way. He knew as well as I did that a few miles farther on down in that green valley was the town of Pensive, and that there was plenty of oats waiting for him and a good feed and a little liquor waiting for me.

BUT I SAT there enjoying my quirlie and the scene and wondering if sure enough this was going to be the end of the road for me. You see, in the hills and rocks to the south of Pensive there was quite a bit of gold, so I'd been told. I aimed to come in from that direction like I'd been prospecting and found something. That way nobody would maybe figure I hadn't come by all that dust under the right circumstances.

So after a few minutes I flipped the quirlie away and spurred Jug. The darned fool must have been dreaming, for turning he stumbled on a big rock and darned near went to his knees. I jerked up his head, cussing him a bit, and then saw something that made me get out of the hull right quick.

There was a hole beneath that rock old Jug had kicked, and there was a couple of grain sacks wadded down careful like in the hole. Now a grain sack is usually a grain sack. Unless like these two they got eyeholes cut in them. A man that's not a member of the profession might look all day at holey grain sacks and never catch on, but to a mechanic, sight of two holes cut about the distance of a man's eyes means just one thing.

A couple of other rannies had also observed the marvelous mysteries of nature in helping those who help themselves. Somebody else had noted that this here butte on the bend of a sharply rising road made a danged good place to hold up a stagecoach.

Well, sir, I put them sacks back right careful and rolled the rock back over the hole. "Jug," I said, arguing with him, "we ain't even got any idea what time the stage comes. Now I'd admire as much as you to hole up back there somewhere and see what these two gents look like that have made such careful preparations for the business in hand. Might be we'd even pick up a couple of pointers, but I think after weighing it pro and con, we better ride on into Pensive as planned."

And Jug not answering, I slid him on his haunches down onto the road and we took off again. Now as soon as I hit level slope, soon as I got into the grove of trees, as a matter of fact, I figured it was time for me to ride off toward the southeast if I planned to be seen coming in from the hills.

Funny how an old hand can get caught with his gunbelt empty, so to speak. I'll swear I wasn't following no trail at all, just letting old Jug pick his way and sort of dreaming in the saddle, maybe finger-combing my brand new, glossy black beard, when all of a sudden Jug snorted and sort of wheeled. I told you he was a smart horse. He had rounded a clump of bushes, and there we was practically in the yard of as pretty a little cottage as a hairpin could hope to see in many a day's riding. It was painted white and there was a lot of flowers growing around in real grass and there was a regular well in the back yard.

I was sitting there studying about the wisdom of maybe sneaking a drink of water, when *WHOOM!* Never in all my years have I heard a cannon, but that *WHOOM* sounded like a cannon must sound. My Stetson took off in one direction and Jug took off in another, and due to the fact that I'd had a foot out of the stirrup studying that pretty well, I flew in another direction. I lit hard, with danged near all the breath knocked out of me, and I knew better than try to make for cover. Mad? I could have bit the horn off my kak with no trouble at all. So I laid there playing possum, so to speak, with my left hand fumbling for my left gun, and in no time at all there was somebody standing over me. Through my lashes I saw the muzzle of

the biggest gun I ever saw in my life.

A cracked voice shrilled, "Ball o' fire! It ain't that Jeff Carson at all! It's a total stranger with a long black beard!"

I opened my eyes and said, "Yes'm, it sure is. Why in the world would you be blazing away at a total stranger with that cannon?"

SHE was the oldest, brownest, shriveledest-up old lady I ever saw. She spit out a half a cup full of snuff and said, "Ain't no cannon, stranger, it's a buffalo gun. And I blazed at you on account of I thought you was that miserable Jeff Carson." She began cussing that miserable Jeff Carson then and, when she paused to get her breath, I managed to get a word in edgeways.

I said, "Reckon this Jeff Carson has got a long black beard?"

"Sure ain't," she conceded and said she hadn't seen a beaver like mine since Jubal Early died. "It's just my eyesight ain't so good any more," she admitted. "But that Jeff Carson sent word by my granddaughter that he was coming to see me and I sent word right back that I'd salivate him if he did! Reckon there ain't no harm done. I missed you."

I picked up my hat and showed her she hadn't missed me entirely so she wouldn't feel so bad, and asked her for the water that had got me in this here trouble. While I was drinking, she said Jeff Carson was a this and that and a that and this on account of he wanted to marry her granddaughter, and would I do her a favor and shoot hell out of him once I got to Pensive, only be careful for the young devil is pretty good with a gun himself?

Old Jug was peeping his square head out from behind some trees to see what was going on so I figured we better ramble. I told the old lady—she said her name was Gram, just Gram—I'd speak to this here Jeff Carson, and as I started to ride off she shrilled after me, "Mister, you go in the Starlight Cafey and tell my granddaughter, Ida Mae, not to come home without that paint tonight. And if it ain't bright red enough I'll send it back!"

Well, sir, there wasn't no use swinging south and coming in out of the hills now, what with this old Gram having seen me. She'd no doubt tell her daughter, Ida Mae, about taking a potshot at a stranger with a black beard, and Ida Mae would probably tell everybody else and right soon some busybody would wonder things. So I rode on back to the road, and by gosh, I wasn't a quarter mile farther on until here came the stage!

Four good horses easing in the traces, a driver that looked like he knew his stuff, and a mean-looking shotgun guard riding on the seat beside him. Disgusted like, I said, "Jug, you old fool, if we'd have just held on back at the butte not only would we have seen who the two grain sacks belonged to, but I'd be wearing a whole hat now instead of this ventilated Stetson.

Well, pretty soon right ahead of me lay Pensive. And from where I sat it surely looked like a pretty little town. We rode on, me and Jug, for maybe two hundred yards when I see the funniest thing I ever saw in my life. There was a big hand-painted sign to the left of the road. It said, "BOOTHILL." Now I seen many a Boothill in my ramblings, but this was the first one I ever saw advertised. Back off the road I could see maybe a couple of dozen graves, but this here funny thing I was telling you about was a sort of gibbet, hanging to one side of the sign. Attached to that gibbet by a hangman's rope was a pair of batwing chaps, a pair of rusted six guns, a faded out blue shirt and a pair of battered boots. There was a sign on them, too.

It said:

"OWLHOOT STAY OUT OF PENSIVE.
THIS IS THE GEAR OF WACO TOLLIVER
HIS BONES ARE IN BOOTHILL."

Three times I read that over and kept getting madder all the time. It was a damned lie, that sign was. Waco Tolliver never would have worn stuff like that hanging there. Waco Tolliver was sort of on the dudish side and liked to dress up.

And dang it, Waco Tolliver's bones wasn't in the Pensive Boothill! Not by a danged sight!

Me, I'm Waco Tolliver, and never in my life had I been closer than a thousand miles to Pensive!

WELL, SIR, I cached my gold dust, and I rode on into Pensive thinking what a hell of a way that was to welcome a stranger that had come all the way from California. I located me a feedyard and left Jug there, after rubbing him down myself, and I located me a hotel and registered as T. E. Smith of Oklahoma. The clerk stared at my beard like he was expecting an eagle to fly out of it, put a key on the desk and went back to his chair with a sigh. He was asleep before I hit the stairs. Up in my room I washed up good, combed my hair and my beard and brushed off my clothes. I hung my chaps up on a nail and used the towel to shine my boots, then I went downstairs, being careful not to wake the clerk as I went out on the street.

It was evening, but even at that I reckon I could have fired one of my guns right straight down the street without hitting anybody. I went in a place marked *Last Chance* thinking how funny it was that every darned town I'd hit from California to here had had a *Last Chance* saloon. A bum that must have been the swamper was sleeping at a table. The barkeeper was buying back his laundry from an old Chinee, and I waited patient-like at the bar.

The barkeeper said, "Charlie, you takeum lemon soda to the Stardust Cafey on the way back."

He set a little box with about a dozen bottles of lemon soda up on the bar. The Chinee said Charley would takeum and did. Then the bartender came up and without asking set out the bottle. Discouraged like, he leaned an elbow on the bar and stared out the window. The liquor was all right, howsomever.

I said, making conversation, "That's more lemon soda than I see in a long time, friend."

"It's Jeff Carson," he said, gloomily, like that explained all. "Reckon he's getting ready to go off on a tear again."

"On lemon soda?" I asked.

He nodded. "Always drinks lemon soda looking for an argument, same as Todd wears that high hat hoping somebody'll get drunk and try to knock it off."

I poured myself another drink right quick wondering just what sort of town I'd come into! Rannies drinking lemon soda and wearing high hats trying to start an argument!

Politely, I said, "Have much trouble here in Pensive?"

He sighed. "Not much lately, not much since we got our present marshal." He got the most bitter look on his face I ever see on a man. "Feller can't shoot a woman," he said.

I choked. "Now wait," I managed. "What's shooting a woman got to do with marshals and having no trouble?"

He looked more miserable than ever, leaned across the bar. "You ain't going to believe it, stranger, but Pensive, the roughest, toughest he-man town in these parts has got a *woman marshal!*"

He poured me another drink, quick and I sloshed her through my whiskers. "Yes, sir," he said, "a woman marshal! Big Emma Lane, her that was wife to Big Bill Lane who used to be our marshal, the devil rest his soul."

NOW it was like pulling teeth to get the story of the town's disgrace out of him. He got so sorrowful about it he was taking drink for drink with me. He told me how Big Bill Lane had been riding the stage to Concha City about four months ago when robbers held it up. In the fracas Big Bill himself got killed.

Well, sir, seems they hauled his body right back to Pensive, and when Big Emma seen him, she didn't break down and bawl like any good wife would have done. No, sir, not Big Emma. She leaned over her dead husband and unpinned his star and pinned it right on her own bosom. She unbuckled his gun and strapped it right around her waist, and she announced to one and all that no

murdering stage robbers could shoot her husband and she reckoned it was up to her to take over. She had ever since.

"Course," said the bartender, gulping down another quick one, "we elected another marshal right away, figuring it was just a woman's whim. So over he goes to her house to get the star."

I said, "And what happens? Don't hesitate so much."

A cracked voice shrilled, "Balls o' fire! It's a total stranger with a long black beard!"

"She threw him through the window and sent the town a bill for the glass. Said she was marshal till she got the fellers that killed her husband and she'd shoot any man that tried to tell her no." He shook his head dolefully. "Hell of it is she can and will do it!"

I said, "Riding in I passed Boothill. What about that stuff belonging to a feller named Waco Tolliver? I hear he was a pretty bad man out in California and them parts. Did she—?"

"She did," he nodded. "And you never saw a ranny so surprised in your life as

he was, so they say. She was riding the stage herself that day." He poured us both another drink. "She fairly filled him full of lead. We all figured it was him that killed Big Bill and maybe now she'd give the star back. But she rode over to Concha City and found out this Waco hairpin had been over there in jail at the time her old man was killed. So she's still got the star."

I said, "How'd they know this feller was this Waco Tolliver?" I was starting to burn up again. "He use that name in jail in Concha City?"

"Nope. But one of the boys around here—think it was High Hat Todd—had seen Waco out in California. Seems this Waco made quite a business of holding up coaches out there—but he sure didn't try but once in these here parts. She got him dead center."

I sort of blustered, "Star or no star, I'd like to see any dad-blamed woman—what's the matter?"

My bartender friend was slightly green around the gills. He was shaking his head from side to side like he was seeing a ghost and not believing it.

Right at my shoulder a voice said, "You'd like to see a woman do what, stranger?"

Slowly, feeling like the bartender looked, I turned my head. We'd been so busy talking we hadn't heard her come in. There she stood, more woman than I'd seen in years. She must have stood all of nineteen hands high, tall as me, in her high-heeled boots. And look, I saw first glance she wasn't fat. Darn me, she was just *big*. A man's sombrero pushed back on her head showed a lot of yellow hair tucked up high. Her shirt was open at the throat, her sleeves rolled up, her hands on her hips right above her gunbelt. And I mean she didn't have no trouble holding that gunbelt up! Not Big Emma. She was wearing levis that showed signs of use, and the way she pulled her red upper lip back when she talked showed a mouth full of the prettiest gold teeth I ever saw.

She sort of rocked back and forth on her heels, her big blue eyes sweeping from my beard to my two thonged-down guns and back again to my beard. Once more she said, "You'd like to see a dad-blamed woman—?"

So I said gently, "That's all, ma'am. I'd just like to see a dad-blamed woman."

SHE looked back at my beard again and bellied the bar. The bartender came up from beneath the bar and set out a bottle. She cocked an eye at me and filled my glass. She said, "Here's to crime, stranger," and after I tossed it off with her, added, "You know I always did say there was something about a beard!"

So I told her yes'm there sure was and bought her a drink back and we talked of this and that. I told her I'd planned on just riding through, but that Pensive was such a peaceful place with so many attractions I figured maybe I'd stay a while. Then sort of gallant like I told her she was the first female marshal I ever saw. But she said no, she was just a poor weak woman doing right by her poor dead husband, and I told her what a fine thing that was.

Well, sir, she said she had to go, but while she was pulling on a pair of man's leather gloves, she said, "Smitty," she was already calling me Smitty, "do you play euchre?"

I said I was one of the best euchre players I ever saw. So she nodded like she'd expected the answer and flashed her pretty teeth at me and went on out, saying she'd maybe be seeing me.

The bartender groaned.

I said, "She don't look like no hellion. Matter of fact, I like lots of woman, and she is. What are you groaning about?"

He said he was groaning on my account. "Her old man had a black beard, too, though not as long as yours. They used to sit up till all hours of the night playing euchre!"

I took another drink, quick.

WASN'T no trouble at all finding the Stardust Cafey and there wasn't no trouble spotting Ida Mae, Gram's granddaughter. She was a right purty

filly with red hair and a fair skin and a lot of freckles, standing about fifteen hands and running a little too much to the thin side. I ordered me a steak and some fried potatoes and some coffee before I ever saw this ranny at the table. Matter of fact, I heard him first.

She came back to lay out my cutting and forking tools, and a hard voice called, "Bring me another bottle of lemon soda, the best drink in the world for he-men!"

I looked back over my shoulder at the table. There was maybe a dozen empty bottles sitting before this young galoot. He stared back at me with a hard challenge in his eye, and all at once I remembered what the bartender had told me about Jeff Carson drinking lemon soda just to start an argument. Ida Mae trotted around with the lemon soda and I heard her whisper for him please not to start no argument.

Soon as she left, he smacked his lips and said in a loud voice, "I claim there ain't no better drink than lemon soda for a man with hair on his chest!" He got up then and stared at me. He was danged near as tall as me, too, and he had his gun belted low, like he knew how to use it.

I said politely, "I reckon you're Ida Mae, Gram's grandaughter?"

The waitress said she allowed she was. I could feel this lemon soda addict's breath on my neck.

I said, "Gram said for you not to forget the red paint and to be sure it's bright red or she'd send it back."

Behind me, a choked voice said, "Do you know that old battleaxe, that old—!"

"Jeff!"

He quit then. He sank down on the stool beside me and buried his face in his hands. Through his fingers he said, stricken, "If ever a mortal man faced the trouble and worry I got, I feel sorry for him."

I took off my hat and showed him the holes. He said, "Gram?" sort of hopeless like.

"It's her eyesight failing," I told him. "She thought I was a feller name of Carson, which same, I take it, is you?"

She threw him through the window, and sent the town a bill for broken glass.

He said that was right and kept right on moaning. "Here we are, me and Ida Mae, wanting to hook up in double harness. Me, for the first time being able to support a wife and that old rapscallion threatening to shoot me on account of the don't like Big Emma Lane."

My steak came. I said, "I don't get it, Jeff. It don't make no sense!"

He slapped the counter, "Me! Me, Jeff Carson, I'm the duly elected marshal of the town of Pensive! And I can't take the job on account of Big Emma, and Gram won't let me marry Ida Mae until I do take the job! Did you ever hear the like, stranger?"

I cut off a mouthful of steak and put it in the right spot. I swallowed and was just about to tell Jeff I'd never heard the like when the whole danged outside seemed filled with shooting and yelling. *Bangety-bang-bang* went somebody's equalizer, followed by a series of bloodcurdling *yippees*.

"Ain't ever been curried below the knees," screamed somebody. *Bangety-bang-bang!*

I slid off the stool and made for the wall and part of a table's shelter.

Ida Mae said, "It isn't nothing—just poor Russian Bill. High Hat'll take care of him."

THE DOOR OPENED up and this fellow named High Hat Todd was there with his back half turned. He was dressed same as you and me, boots, levis, blue shirt—except for his hat. He was

wearing a tall brown silk hat, and while he was standing there arguing with someone on the street I counted eleven little black ribbons tied around that hat!

He was saying, "Now, Bill, behave yourself. You come on in here and eat or I'll not let you shoot your pretty gun any more."

Reckon Ida Mae saw the wondering look on my face. "Russian Bill is crazy, poor fellow," she said. "Them's just blanks he shoots. High Hat takes care of him."

I remembered the bartender had said it was High Hat that had identified the salivated stagecoach robber as Waco Tolliver. I said, "What's them ribbons on his hat for?"

"Ribbons? Why, there's one for each gent that got liquored up and sneered at his high hat. Don't say nothing."

By now Russian Bill was letting High Hat bring him into the restaurant. Russian Bill was a tall, gangling feller, dressed in sort of wornout cowpoke clothes and a battered black Stetson. His hair was long and lemon-colored, coming clear down to his shoulders, and he had a thin handle-bar mustache and a stringy Vandyke to match the hair. He had the bluest eyes I ever saw.

High Hat was certainly a hard-looking customer, scarred and battered about the dark face like someone had put the boots to him. A funny thing struck me—I got a good memory for faces, I have. And the minute I saw High Hat I knew I'd never seen him before in my life. But there was something sort of familiarlike about the dummy, Russian Bill.

Back to a rear table they went to sit down, High Hat facing me. Now I will admit, I turned to stare at them. And High Hat grinned like a wolf. He got up slowlike, and he moved toward me like a cat. About ten feet from he, he said, "Stranger, are you by any chance staring at my hat?"

So I remembered the bartender again. Remembered he'd said this ranny wore that hat for the same reason that Jeff Carson drank lemon soda. I told him no indeed I was not staring at his hat, and turned back to my steak recalling what a peace-loving *hombre* I was. I guess maybe I got three bites. Somebody whirled me around—it was Russian Bill. For a long minute he stared at me and I stared back.

He cried, "It's a beard! He's got more beard than me!" His face wrinkled up like he was about to cry, and before I could stop him he ran a hand into my beard and danged near yanked it off. I'll swear I didn't hit him! I put a hand on his chest and pushed. He went back and fell over a table.

High Hat yelled, "Yon can't hit Russian Bill, damn you! Stand up and slap leather!"

Hell, I was already standing up! I saw High Hat actually reaching for his gun. Peace-loving or not, no man is going to stand still and get his belt buckle blowed through his spine! I drew. And I shot his gun right out of his hand.

He was still howling and jumping up and down when something poked me in the back. "Sorry, Smitty," said a crisp voice, "I'll have to take you in for that. Assault with a deadly weapon!"

IT WAS Bib Emma. I began to bluster right away quick. Jeff Carson yelled, "You blamed fool, Emma, me and Ida Mae will both testify that High Hat picked the argument and drew first. Anyway he ain't hurt, though this bearded feller could have punctured his ornery hide just as well as not."

Big Emma shook her head and the star on her bosom quivered real nice. She said, "Smitty, undo them guns and hand 'em to me. You're going to spend the night in jail."

Maybe I would have argued, I was that mad, but it sort of looked to me like her left eyelid dropped in a wink. So meekly I unbuckled my guns and handed them to her. She stuck her left arm through the belts and herded me out on the street. All the way to the jail I kept two or three steps ahead of her and she stalked along behind me all business with a gun out and ready. Some of the good citizens of Pensive was down in the metropolis

She had shucked all of them men's clothes and whipped up a dinner to make you drool.

by that time, lining the sidewalk and wondering what sort of killer Marshal Big Emma Lane had this time.

The jail was the only brick building in town, and as usual, the marshal's living quarters was attached, what with the marshal being the jailer as well. Well, sir, we went in the front door of the jail and she dumped my guns in a safe and turned to me sort of smiling, saying, "I'll have to apologize for the way the place looks, Smitty, but you know how it is?"

Me, speechless, I followed her while she unlocked a barred door that led to a little corridor. There was only four cells, two on each side. She swung back the door of the second on the left and put the lamp inside. Turning, she said, "I do hope you like it. It's the coolest one I have."

That cell was without doubt the nicest I ever saw. She had the cot all made up with nice clean sheets, they was a bouquet of flowers on the table and a rag rug on the floor. There was even a little framed sampler over the table that said *God Bless Our Home.* Heck, I didn't know what to say.

So she said, "I'll stir you up a little something to eat, Smitty. You can look at a book till I get back. Then we'll begin."

I said, "Begin what?" pretty suspi-

cious like.

"Euchre, of course," she said, like she was surprised. "My poor dead husband and I used to play euchre every night!"

Well, sir, I just didn't look at that book at all while she was gone. I've seen the elephant and I've heard the owl, but this beat anything I'd ever come up against in all my sinful life. I just sat there on the edge of the sheeted cot and figured. Hell, she'd aimed to arrest me right along. My blasting High Hat's gun out of his hand just fell in handy-like. If it hadn't have been that it would have been something else, I reckon. What a woman!

Thinking of High Hat made me think of Russian Bill, too. I closed my eyes and began thinking hard. I knew I'd seen that ranny somewhere, knew it just as well as I knew I'd never laid eyes on High Hat. Yet it was High Hat that claimed he knew Waco Tolliver.

Then pretty soon she was back. I tell you, I couldn't say a word. Big Emma had shucked off all them man clothes and was wearing a blue checked gingham dress with a lot of white frills and ruffles like some women do. She had one of them trays and my supper which I'd missed at the Stardust Cafey, only the Stardust and Ida Mae could never hope to come up to this! Steak you could cut with a fork! French fries crisp and hot. Eggs, sunny side up, and fresh tomatoes as well as biscuits that would melt in your mouth.

She sat there on a stool and watched me eat with a shy smile on her face. Once she said, "Mr. Lane used to say I was a fine cook."

I WASHED DOWN the mouthful I was working on and told her Mr. Lane was right four ways from the ace. And all the time I was thinking what a fool he was to go and get himself shot. Well, sir, after a while I leaned back and she took away the tray, and here she came trotting back with a deck of cards and we played euchre for a long while.

More conversation than card-playing, though. Big Emma sort of liked to talk. She told me about Big Ed's beard and how she'd always admired men that could grow whiskers like me and him. She told me how they'd been together as far north as Nome, and picked up considerable money. How they owned a ranch—I mean she owned it now, what with him being dead. And how he'd got restless just ranching a few thousand head of cattle and they'd moved into Pensive and he'd got himself elected marshal.

"It's no job for a woman, though," she said, brushing a tear from her eye. "Not for a poor weak, sentimental woman like me that'd rather spend her time cooking and baking and cleaning."

So I sort of patted her on the back and consoled her and we got to talking about our past lives, only I wasn't very truthful. And she told me how she used to be on the stage, and she recited some folderol about "Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" But I told her I'd seen the production and pretty soon she went on back to her part of the brick building, what with it being way past midnight.

Well, sir, I lay there under them clean sheets and just got to thinking what a lot of sorrow there was in this old world. There was poor old Gram, for example. Everybody knows grandmothers look forward to a happy married life for their favorite granddaughters. And could Gram have that happiness? No! And poor Ida Mae! Could she have Jeff Carson? No! Because Jeff couldn't get to be marshal! And take Big Emma, herself, unhappy as all git out acting as marshal, but not able to quit on account of the oath she'd sworn. It certainly was sad.

I even got to thinking about myself, Waco Tolliver, and the awful chances I'd taken all my life. And what did I have to show for it but a little over one hundred and eighty ounces of gold dust and some long black whiskers.

It seemed to me it all come right down to one thing, that there was only one way in the world to make all them people—and me, too—happy and contented again. And that was to get them there stage coach robbers, so that Big Emma could turn over the marshal's badge to Jeff Carson and Jeff could marry Ida

Mae and then even Gram would be happy.

I was just about asleep, thinking of Big Emma's pretty yellow hair and shiny gold teeth, and her steaks and her biscuits and her ranch and her cows, and somehow or other, into my mind popped that thing she'd said. That, "Romeo! Romeo! Wherefore art thou, Romeo?" business.

And all at once it came to me where I'd seen Russian Bill. It was at Redondo, out in the gold country, and some traveling actors was putting on that play, "Romeo and Juliet," in the opera house. Yes, sir, I could close my eyes and see that woman in the white nightgown out on that balcony saying that silly thing, asking Romeo wherefore he was, and after she got through, who stepped out but Russian Bill! Russian Bill in tight, red colored long underwear and a funny shirt. He had the same long, lemon-colored hair, only of course no handle-bar mustache and scraggly Vandyke. And he didn't call himself Russian Bill, either.

ON ACCOUNT of my horse, Jug, not being there to talk to I guess I sort of talked to myself. I said, "Waco, old boy, that tears it. Russian Bill ain't no more crazy than you or even Big Emma. Why? Why, because it was *him*, not High Hat Todd, that knew about Waco Tolliver being a robber on the coast. So, when that ranny was salivated by Big Em, it was him that put the Waco Tolliver bug in High Hat's ear. For some reason he figured it would look like it was Waco who killed Big Ed Lane, maybe on account of this Waco being so famous in his line of work."

And I lay there thinking about how it seemed like High Hat and Russian Bill had deliberately gone out of their way to provoke gunplay a little earlier, which meant one thing only. In spite of my whiskers Russian Bill recognized me as the real Waco Tolliver!

Believe me, I didn't sleep so good that night. I was pretty content to let Waco Tolliver keep on being buried out to the Pensive Boothill. And so I finally dropped off and dreamed a hodgepodge full of grain sacks cached beneath a rock, and buffalo guns and bright red paint, and thousands of cattle grazing.

IT WAS still gray dawn when I woke up. I washed a little and dressed and tiptoed out, Big Emma having left all the doors open handy like. I found some paper and I wrote a note to Big Emma saying if she ever liked whiskers to trust me and believe in me on account of, if everything went all right, I would get the fellers that held up the stage and shot her recent husband to Kingdom Come. I put it where I knew she'd find it, swung open the unlocked door of the safe and put on my guns. In no time at all I'd wakened the sleepy hostler at the feed-yard and was riding good old Jug out of town the way I'd come.

When I started back again, I'd had another good look at the remains of Waco Tolliver and had my dug-up gold dust in my saddle bags again. It was about the first customer in the Stardust Cafey and little Ida Mae looked real downcast. I tried to cheer her up, but there wasn't no use, she was real put out about the whole affair.

I said, "Ida Mae, did you recall to take home the red paint for Gram?"

She sighed. "Yes, I certainly did take it home, only just like I figured she sent it back by me this morning on account of it not being red enough."

I said, "I'm riding out that way a little later on today. I'd be glad to exchange it for you and take it out."

She said that would be fine. I asked her about Jeff Carson and she said he'd got tired of looking for trouble last night and had switched off the lemon pop and was now nursing a terrific hangover. So after a while I took the not-red-enough red paint and went down to the hardware store and exchanged it for some a little on the redder side. Then me and old Jug started out again.

Don't tell me horses aren't smart. We'd no sooner got in that little piece of woods than old Jug began rearing and holding back, and before we came clear in sight

(Continued on page 92)

TOPHAND

Rusty Owen couldn't wring the talking-crow's neck . . . any more than he could have strangled blue-eyed Honey Haber or choked her kid brother. And he had reason enough for wanting to do all three.

WHEN a young and healthy galoot, just turned twenty-one, has nigh twenty thousand of good U. S. A. folding money in hand it's cause for jubilatin' and singin'. 'Specially when he has only to fork his cayuse and ride wide, handsome, and free over half a dozen States where no hombre outside the law itself would be askin' how come all this high-time dinero.

Rusty Owen wasn't either jubilatin' or singin'. He clutched the packages of old bills in sweat-moistened hands. He stared at the open door of big Mark Haber's old-fashioned safe and tried to forget the past two months he had been riding tophand for Haber's Ace iron.

Chiefly, Rusty Owen was trying to put three living things out of his mind. Two of these were human. It was too peculiar to make good sense, but the third was a bird, and such a profanely vehement bird at that.

Rusty glanced from the window of Mark Haber's pine-walled and pine-ceiled office room. Only Wung Loo would be about the home place and the aging Oriental cook would be deep in his late afternoon nap, seeing that Haber, and his girl Honey, and the kid Bucky drove into War Dance for supplies every second Saturday.

Well, Rusty had to be moving pronto. Two long months of hard riding for the Ace had been needful to make up to the Haber folks and come upon the combination to the old safe. Rusty couldn't play his luck too far.

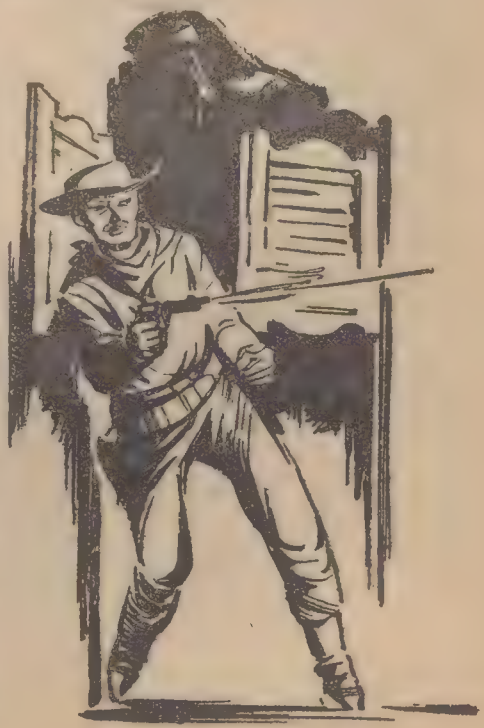
He was about to turn, almighty sure he could put three living things out of his mind, as if they had never been, when he was struck at the back of his neck close to his shoulder. Rusty hadn't heard the faintest sound of an approach, nary so much as a soft footstep, for there had been none.

"Gaw-gaw yuh!" squawked a voice that didn't sound human. "Gawtackit! Cawn, Rawstee! Cawn! Cawn fa' Crippee, Gaw-gaw yuh!"

Something like the point of sharp scissors hit the lobe of his right ear viciously. This was followed by another squawk.

"Haw-haw-haw! Cawn, Rustee!"

Rusty Owen got some stiffness back into his suddenly shaking legs. He reached up and seized the crow, which was called Crippy because of a missing leg, and he had the impulse to wring the neck of the bird that Honey Haber had taught to talk.



OWLHOOTER

By MAX NEILSON

"Gaw-gay yuh!" and "Gaw-tuckit!" were the crow's own idea, along with some more specific profanity picked up around the Ace bunkhouse.

Rusty's fingers turned weak and he couldn't break the crow's neck more than he could have strangled blue-eyed Honey Haber or have choked towheaded Bucky, Honey's kid brother.

For the crow blinked its beady eyes at him and appeared to be winking. Crippy knew he always got a feed of corn from Rusty when he put on his cussing act.

"I would have to wait and feed yuh when I ain't got no time," growled Rusty, his fiery hair curling with sweat dampness which had come from opening Mark Haber's safe.

Crippy's continued squawking complaint covered what might have been the crunching of boots on the gravel under the window. Because of that, Rusty missed seeing the grim face of Jute Soler, another Ace rider, showing for a few seconds and then vanishing.

Nor did Rusty hear Jute Soler deer-walking away from the window and making it back to his horse he had left

Falling, Rusty didn't see grim old Mark Haber inside the batwings with a smoking gun in his hand.

near the corn crib up above the long and rambling log house that Mark Haber had been building onto, off and on, for nigh thirty years.

Rusty could see old Wung Loo still sleeping in the kitchen. He got down a small corn sack and filled Crippy's dish on the porch. The one-legged crow swore happily over the unexpected feed.

RUSTY had his Ace iron sorrel tied at the end of the corral close to the town road across the creek bridge.

"Have to shed the beast as soon as I meet up with Slagg," thought Rusty. "It'll be well dark 'fore I hit War Dance, an' quick as I get my split, I'm high-tailin' for Taos or maybe Pueblo. Reckon Slagg'll have another good'n staked out, but I'm takin' my dinero an' I quittin' the long trail."

Even then Rusty's gray eyes were hard and worried because of the something in his mind he didn't quite understand. Not any more than he savvied clearly why he had just fed Crippy, the crow, instead of wringing the bird's neck.

As he reached the sorrel and was about to hit the kak, Rusty thought he heard the faint sounds of a horse running at some distance. But it must have been his guilty imagination, he decided, when he keened his ears and didn't hear it any more.

Rusty was trying to keep his mind solely upon the folding money tucked inside his shirt. He kept thinking of cowtowns he soon would be riding through. Towns crowded and spilling over with cowpunchers celebrating Saturday nights.

Waddies bucking their horses down main streets. Dances with glittering girls, and drinks. And him with the money to throw this way and that.

For Rusty was but twenty-one, and he hadn't been with the wild bunch long, so his promised one-third split of twenty thousand seemed to be an inexhaustible fortune More so, when he dreamed of how easily he could run it up on the wheels or with the cards at Taos and Pueblo. That was the vinegar and the high hope of youth.

"Gaw-gaw yuh!"

Crippy, the crow, was squawking and half hopping, half flying toward him from the porch. Crippy was doing the best a smart old bird could with what cuss words it knew, and Rusty got a fool idea that Crippy was trying to tell him something.

"Gotta put a tighter loop on my thinkin'," said Rusty. "Ain't no sense in dreamin' fool things. If I'd wanna do it, which I don't, Slagg ain't never let go of ary jigger he's once tooken in on his plans. So the only way out is to keep ridin' long and far."

Crippy squawked more profanity and added "Bawky," the same being the best the talking crow could do with the name of Bucky Haber, the ranch kid. Crippy flew to Rusty's shoulder again.

Rusty swore some himself and would have slapped the crow down. Then he saw Bucky. The kid was lying over beside the corral fence. Towheaded Bucky was a crumpled heap.

Rusty had believed the button to be nine miles away in War Dance with Mark Haber and Honey. But here he was, and he lay like dead against the lower corral rails. The pinto bronc that Rusty had been teaching Bucky to ride was on the other side of the corral with a half-cinched saddle dragging under its belly.

"I tol' him never to go nigh that dang' pinto 'less I was around," groaned Rusty, taking that corral bars with a one-handed jump. "The little sonuvagun stayed home, an' then he tried to rig up that devil himself."

Rusty forgot all about the twenty thousand dollars snuggled inside his shirt. One of Bucky's arms was queerly bent. Blood flacked the kid's mouth, coming from his throat. Rusty was forced to bend low to make sure of Bucky's faint breathing.

"Wung Loo!" sang out Rusty. "Wake up, yuh dumb heathen!"

Rusty tried to straighten Bucky's arm, but was too sick to finish that. He was afraid to feel the kid's side where it

looked as if all his ribs had been caved in.

"Fetch blankets, Wung Loo!" shouted Rusty, as the Chinese cook waddled sleepily from the kitchen. "Put 'em in the old buckboard, an' pronto!"

Rusty didn't realize it, but there was a dry sobbing in his throat. Never had a team of frisky buckskins been harnessed faster. Rusty had them hitched to the old buckboard five minutes after he had come upon Bucky.

When he had Bucky well wrapped in soft blankets on the bed of the buckboard, Rusty almost forgot to tie his own riding sorrel on behind. Just before he climbed into the seat, he listened again to Bucky's shallow breathing and he saw more blood.

Crippy, the crow, kept batting around, finally settling upon Rusty's shoulder, repeating "Gaw-gaw ruh," over and over, in a highly excited squawk. At the last, Rusty ordered old Wung Loo into the buckboard.

"Climb in back there an' hold onto the kid so's he won't be jolted!" directed Rusty. "Keep his head up, an' hang on yourself!"

Over that nine-mile road to War Dance, the half-wild buckskins must have had the notion they were running away. Rusty pushed them on free bits, the old buckboard swaying from side to side.

Rusty's broad mouth was grimly set and his gray eyes suffered when he'd glance back at Bucky and Wung Loo to make sure the blankets were padding the ride some for the kid.

"Doc Sawyer can fix 'im—Doc Sawyer *has* to fix 'im—"

Rusty gritted his teeth as he uttered the words over and over again.

And not once during that wild ride did Rusty have a thought for the twenty thousand of Mark Haber's folding money tucked inside his shirt. Rusty didn't even think about it being unusual that he should see Jute Soler beside the hitchrack of the Paramount Saloon as he fought the sweating ponies to a stop in front of Doc Sawyer's office.

Rusty had left Jute Soler with other Ace riders when he had sashayed into the ranchhouse this late afternoon to steal the money from Mark Haber's safe.

"THREE or four cracked ribs," pronounced Doc Sawyer, when he had some color back in Bucky's thin face. "Looks like a scratched lung, an' there's a double break o' that arm. I don't know—"

"Yuh don't know?" Rusty grabbed the shoulder of the little sawbones, whirling him around. "Yuh got to know! He ain't gonna die! He ain't! Why'n't yuh do somethin'?"

Doc Sawyer winced under the powerful grip of Rusty's young fingers, but he pushed his hand away and rubbed his shoulder.

"Take it easy, young fella," advised Doc Sawyer." You ain't helpin' any by goin' loco. Here, hold the kid's arm straight, an' easylike, while I get it splinted. All we can do with busted ribs is bandage 'em tight an' wait. The bleedin' stopped an' maybe it ain't so bad."

"Bucky, oh, Bucky!" cried a clear, sweet voice, and blue-eyed Honey Haber was suddenly beside Rusty, with grim old Mark Haber coming through the door. "What is it, Rusty? How'd it happen? Bucky!"

Rusty guessed he'd never noticed how pretty Honey really was. Maybe it was the tears brimming in her blue eyes that did it. Truth was, Rusty had done a heap of avoiding Honey Haber.

Right now Rusty knew he never should have looked at the girl. As Doc Sawyer held Honey back and cautioned her to quiet down, Mark Haber looked at Rusty with hard, level eyes. In his brown, leathery face Haber's eyes were like chips of bluish-gray granite.

"How come, Rusty?" demanded Haber, and his voice was cutting. "Yuh let Bucky git throwed off that pinto? Bucky begged to be stayin' home, sayin' yuh would be givin' him another ride when yuh come in for evenin' chuck."

For the first time the folding money inside his shirt seemed to be burning his hide and Rusty remembered fully why he was here, and what had brought him

to the ranchhouse to find Bucky in the corral.

"Bucky tried riggin' up the pinto 'fore I rode in," said Rusty. "Maybe 'twas a good thing I come in a mite early. Found Bucky in the corral—"

With guilt riding him, Rusty couldn't keep his voice calm and even. He tried to look away from Mark Haber's eyes, his own conscience reading what appeared to be an implacable accusation which should have no cause to be there.

Doc Sawyer broke in, lifting his head and smiling a little.

"Case o' nip an' tuck, Mark," he said to Haber. "But Bucky will come through. Guess I was able to free the pressure o' the busted ribs just in time. Wouldn't have if it had been maybe half an hour later."

HONEY was on her knees beside Bucky and the kid was breathing easier, not with the rasping sound that had chilled Rusty's spine when he first found him. Honey's eyes lifted to Rusty and he saw something there that seemed suddenly to bring maturity to her seventeen years and at the same time to condemn him.

Rusty risked one more question:

"You're sure Bucky'll live, an' he won't be crippled, doc?"

"I said he'd pull through," said Doc Sawyer. "That busted arm might be stiff for a spell, but at his age it'll limber up."

"Reckon I'll be goin', then," said Rusty in a low tone, fighting something inside he could not understand.

Some warmth, almost kindliness, had come into Mark Haber's voice when Doc Sawyer had given assurance Bucky would live. But Haber's next words contracted the muscles of Rusty's stomach.

"See yuh brung yore ridin' hoss, Rusty," and Haber spaced his words, his granite eyes boring. "Like yuh figured yuh wouldn't be drivin' the buckboard back to the Ace. Must o' been a heap panicked by Bucky's gettin' hurt."

"Yeah—yeah," gulped Rusty, evading a truth that had been almost forgotten in the wild drive to save Bucky's life. "Reckon I'd never wanted to go back to the Ace if . . . if Bucky hadn't come through. Figured it was my fault, tryin' to learn him to ride that pinto."

"Dad!" Honey exclaimed.

Just that one word. But it held a lot of meaning in some way that Rusty couldn't reason out.

"Yeah, Honey," replied Mark Haber. "I heard who doc said, an' if Rusty hadn't lathered hell an' all out'n them ponies, Bucky like as not wouldn't have been brung here in time."

Rusty's guilt was now like an edged knife cutting into his heart. When he had robbed Mark Haber's safe he had imagined he could ride three living things out of his mind, two of them human and the other only a bird, but what a bird.

"I'll be moseyin' along," said Rusty suddenly, for all of a sudden it had come to him what he must do. "You'll be wantin' to stay in town, I guess, to make sure Bucky comes along."

"Yeah, we'll be doin' that," said Mark Haber.

"Rusty!" Honey walked over softly, her oval, tanned face lifted. "This is for bringin' Bucky to town in time and . . . and 'cause I can't seem to help it."

Before Rusty could even lift his hands, Honey had tiptoed up and kissed him squarely on the mouth. Rusty clamped his teeth and he couldn't speak.

Now he *knew* he had this thing to do. He must return Haber's money to his safe. If he could manage now to do that without Honey or her dad or, later, Bucky finding out what he was, then he could ride away with a clear mind. But this other thing intruded.

What of Clagg, the shrewd and crooked owlhooter boss of Rusty and others? Clagg, who dressed and looked like an honest cattle buyer so he could learn of ranchers who put little faith in banks and cached their money at home.

Clagg, the smart, dudish owlhooter who picked up younkers like Rusty, already in trouble or headed for the wild bunch. Clagg, who planted these younkers as riders with cautious ranchers, to gain

their confidence and make thieving simple —simple for Clagg.

Rusty had one last look at Bucky's pinched face and saw that color was coming back to the kid. Then Rusty turned and walked from Doc Sawyer's place, his knees strangely weak.

"I can put the dinero back," whispered Rusty to himself as he came into the War Dance street, where night now had dropped its foggy curtain. "Then I'll hightail it. Clagg is said to have never let a man double-cross him."

Rusty figured it that maybe he could outride Clagg. Honey and Mark Haber would think he had lit a shuck out of the War Dance country on account of feeling he was responsible for what had happened to Bucky.

"Yes," murmured Rusty. "Bucky'll be all right, an' they won't never know or be holdin' the truth against me."

He was climbing into the seat of the buckboard when Crippy, the crow, gave a flying hop from the bed and landed upon Rusty's shoulder.

All Crippy could say was "Gaw-gaw yuh." But danged if that didn't sound as if the crow was asking a question.

"Yeah, Crippy," said Rusty solemnly. "Bucky'll be all right."

He could have sworn the smart bird uttered a pleased chuckle."

JUTE SOLER was a little drunk. He came along as Rusty was gathering up the reins. Soler was an old Ace rider. He was an honest, loyal waddy and he had been years with Mark Haber.

"Rusty? Yuh . . . yuh headin' home?"

There was that in Soler's voice that expressed surprise, as if he hadn't expetced to see Rusty here.

"Yup, sure," grunted Rusty, not wanting to hold up for a palaver with Soler. "Reckon you heard about Bucky gettin' kicked. He's gonna to be all right, Doc Sawyer says."

Soler was staring at Rusty queerly. The older puncher rubbed his hand across his eyes.

"Yeah, heared about Bucky," he said. "The old man an' Honey are in there with Bucky, ain't they?"

"Sure. They're stayin' the night in town o' course. I'll be takin' this team back an'—"

Soler put a boot up on the wheel hub.

"Yuh talked to the old man Rusty?" he said slowly. "An' yuh mean it's fixed up that—"

"What's on your mind, Soler?" demanded Rusty, ridden by a sudden premonition. "What would be fixed up."

"I mean about that dinero yuh tooken from the safe, Rusty," stated Soler and the drunkenness went out of his voice. "I seen yuh, Rusty, an' I ain't much for fightin', so's I hightailed it to town an' told the old man an' Honey—Rusty, if I'd knowed about yuh bringin' Bucky in to Doc Sawyer I wouldn't have said ary a word . . . I've allus liked yuh, Rusty—"

Rusty was climbing down from the buckboard seat. He passed the reins to Soler's leathery hands. Rusty's voice was suddenly harder and grimmer than it had ever been. In that one minute of Soler's admission, Rusty had become a full-sized man.

"You'll be drivin' the team home, Soler," he said quietly. "I got a chore to do. It's somethin' that oughtta been done a long time ago. I ain't holdin' nothin' ag'in you, Soler. You done what was the right thing."

"But Rusty—"

"You can be handin' this to the old man," said Rusty, loosening the top buttons of Soler's shirt suddenly and thrusting the flat packages of folding money inside.

Rusty's hard, high heels clicked the plank walk as he strode down the War Dance street toward the garish, lighted front of the notorious Paramount Saloon. Thoughts, new for Rusty, hammered at his mind in rhythm with his steps.

He had believed Mark Haber to be a hard man. Rusty had heard stories of Haber that had marked him as a ruthless man in the early days of fighting for his Ace iron on the War Dance range.

Yet Mark Haber had known, when he was in Doc Sawyer's place, of the robbery of his safe. Haber had been told that Rusty probably had nigh twenty thou-

sand of his savings. Honey had also known it.

But Mark Haber had permitted Rusty to walk out, to ride away from the War Dance country with all that dinero, if so minded. It didn't make sense.

Here was the kind of a man Rusty never before had known. Out and out, on the face of it, hard old Mark Haber put a value upon the life of little Bucky higher than twenty thousand in cash money.

Doc Sawyer had made it clear that only the intervention of Rusty in bringing the kid to him in time had saved Bucky's life. So both Mark Haber and Honey had spoken no word to prevent him from leaving.

Honey's kiss—'cause she couldn't seem to help it—burned upon Rusty's mouth. All the time Honey had known that Rusty had robbed her father's safe.

RUSTY'S boot heels tromped harder on the plank walk. There were men and men. Not once during his two months of riding for the Ace had Mark Haber passed him a pleasant word.

Rusty had often looked at Honey, and as often looked away. But he had not looked away too fast to miss her little smile from time to time, as if she could read his mind and wondered at his aloofness.

As for Bucky, the kid had taken to Rusty from the first. It helped take up Rusty's spare time, teaching Bucky to ride, and it gave him an excuse to avoid Honey.

The batwing doors of the Paramount slapped open and shut a short distance away. Rusty tried to put his mind upon Clagg, the dudish and treacherous slicker who continued to have others do his thieving while he lived smoothly and with outward respectability.

There was a flutter near Rusty's ear. Rusty lifted a hand and batted Crippy, the crow, off of his shoulder. Even the crow had become Rusty's friend, though Crippy favored most other Ace riders with profane abuse and vicious peckings at their eyes and noses when they tried to approach him.

"Go home, Crippy!" ordered Rusty harshly. "Home!"

The crow squawked his own version of bad names from a short distance away.

Then Rusty stood at the batwings of the Paramount Saloon. The place was sparsely filled, it being early evening. But Rusty's eyes found Clagg. He had known Clagg would be waiting. It had been set for him to meet Clagg secretly at the hotel later to deliver the Haber money and to receive his share.

Rusty was uneasy now only because he was uncertain how to do what must be done. Rusty was no trick hand with his six-shooter. He could handle the .45 passably well, and he could shoot straight if he took his time.

Clagg, he recalled, had a reputation for being fast and deadly with the pearl-handled gun he wore just under the edge of his black coat. Clagg's record had not been widely spread about, except to the wild bunch and the younkers he rodded in his own peculiar game of robbing the homes of trusting ranchers.

Rusty's conscience was riding him again. Fact was, Rusty was no better than Clagg himself, as he viewed it. Clagg should be stopped, but who was Rusty to adopt suddenly this holier-than-thou attitude?

Only by chance, and Rusty knew it fully, had he failed to meet Clagg and then ride away with a share of Mark Haber's money.

Rusty turned away from the batwings. Honey's kiss still burned on his mouth. The truth still hammered in his brain that Mark Haber counted the life of Bucky worth more than twenty thousand dollars, and that Mark Haber had made no move to stop the waddy he knew had robbed him of his savings.

RUSTY walked away a few steps, then he stopped. Clagg could and would gun him down, of that he was sure. But it had come to Rusty that there would be other younkers like himself, other fools to do Clagg's thieving and sometimes his killings.

For there had been honest men died back along Clagg's trail.

Yes, Clagg was fast enough to kill him, decided Rusty. But in that very killing would lie the finish of Clagg who lived by crime.

Rusty turned back and slapped open the batwings.

Clagg was big, and an immaculate dresser. His ruddy jaws were clean-shaven. He looked like a hearty, good-natured man who inspired confidence.

Rusty was still unsure of what he should do. Then he saw that Clagg was drinking and talking with Lije Holt, another War Dance rancher. Clagg and Holt were shoulder to shoulder.

Lije Holt was a neighbor to Mark Haber. And Rusty had heard that Lije Holt war not one to trust in banks. There could be but one purpose in Clagg's friendliness toward the rancher.

Tonight, in a short time, Clagg expected to collect the big share of the loot from Mark Haber's safe. No doubt Clagg already had another young rider at hand. Lije Holt would find himself hiring a puncher, a younker. In a few weeks, perhaps a couple of months, Clagg would drop into War Dance again.

The savings of Lije Holt would disappear, just as Haber's twenty thousand would have been gone except for Bucky.

Well, Rusty knew he could not kill Clagg, even if he could be faster with his gun. But it came to him there was one thing he could do.

Rusty had it now. He could stop Clagg, end his snaky career. It would mean that Rusty himself would have to pay up. He must do what Mark Haber wouldn't do.

Rusty did not overlook the thin-lipped, pock-marked gunnie over by the stove. This Drake, a lightning iron-slinger, was never far from Clagg, although he never appeared to be openly with him.

"You're smart, Mr. Holt," Clagg was saying in his hearty voice as Rusty stepped along the bar. "Too many cowmen lose out when they get mixed up with banks—"

Clagg's eyes roved, spotted Rusty over Lije Holt's shoulders. Lije Holt was a small man and he was a little drunk.

Rusty did then what he had to do. He stepped into the open and his short, clipped speech brought a hush over the inmates of the big saloon:

"Come to tell yuh, Clagg, that I ain't got the money yuh expected me to steal from Mark Haber's safe!"

Rusty's words were as effective as so many shortly spaced gun shots.

Then he added:

"There was twenty thousand, Clagg, an' I took it! But I ain't splittin' with yuh, 'cause I sent it back to Mark Haber!"

CLAGG'S big face betrayed his indecision, his awkward position. This was something that never before had happened to him. Rusty was standing only a few feet away, his feet braced.

"Who are . . . what the devil you talkin' about, waddy? You must be drunk. I never saw you before."

Clagg's speech was smooth and held just the right note of surprise. Rusty saw that Clagg intended to talk him down. Rusty flamed then, inside.

"Who're yuh sendin' out to rob Lije Holt now yuh found out he caches his dinero at home?" said Rusty flatly. "An' denyin' that I robbed Mark Haber's safe for you ain't doin' no good, Clagg, 'cause Haber knows it, an' the sheriff'll be along any minute now to pick us both up."

Clagg was big, but he was fast. He pushed Lije Holt to one side as his hand dropped to the gun on his thigh.

"You lyin' whelp, accusin' a law-abidin' citizen of something you done yourself!" boomed out Clagg. "All o' you heard what this fool waddy said, an' I'm tellin' him to go for his gun!"

Rusty realized then that his whole idea was doomed to fail. He felt as if his gun hand was weighted. Clagg would shoot him down.

There was a raucous squawking. A black object hurtled past Rusty's ear. Rusty couldn't seem to pull the trigger of his gun, but Clagg's .45 blazed. The shock of a bullet high on one shoulder spun Rusty around.

"Gaw-gaw yuh!"

The squawking oath mingled with an-

(Continued on page 95)

HIGH-HEELED HELL FOR RONDO

ALAN WARNER put the congress-gaitered boot shoes down and shoved back on his fitting stool so that the big gunman's sock foot bumped hard on the floor. Then Alan Warner got up fast, eyes hard in his smooth young face. His impulse was to swing at the tall, mean-eyed Ike Mott.

Alan turned slowly and said: "Go tell your Castels to hire a man who can shoot straight—at a man's face!"

But Alan was a salesman first, a good one, and the owner of the only store in Rondo devoted exclusively to the sale of shoes. Good will had to be nursed along tenderly.

Alan smiled thinly, backed his lean, black-suited five feet ten against the boxed footgear on the shelf-lined wall.

By WILLIAM J. GLYNN

It became speedily and painfully apparent to Alan Warner that if a man aimed to sell shoes successfully in this gun-rodded frontier town, he would have to stand up to a few venomous kicks to the spirit. On the other hand, though, there were possibly ways for a tenderfoot storekeeper to show gunmen some fresh and highly educational facts of strife! . . .

"There's nothing wrong with those boot shoes," Alan said defensively. "They're a mite too small, but that's what you wanted yesterday, Mott. Dress shoes. You've worn them, paid for them —the deal's closed."

Big Ike Mott lurched to his feet, a curse ripping over his tobacco-stained teeth. The whiskey reek on his thick lips was like a noisome club beating at Alan.

"I say them crop-eared boots is no good," Mott snarled. "Too tight, fer one thing. Made my feet all blistered, you slick-talkin' pilgrim!"

"Maybe," Alan said softly, his lips taut, "if you'd change your socks and use a little soap and water on those

stinking number twelves—"

Mott's little green eyes cut savagely at Alan. His hand closed suddenly over the six-shooter on his hip and shucked it clear of leather.

"Listen, city boy," he said flatly, "you or no other town feller's goin' to call me dirty. Savvy? You give me back my dinero, or do I clean out this here fancy shop?"

Mott was padding toward Alan now, on his big sock feet. His .45 was level and pointing at the store man's flat stomach. Alan's lips parted, but his words were like dry toast in his mouth. A cold chill mapped his back. Ike Mott lived by his gun. He'd shoot as easy as a man killing a snake.

"Wait, Mott," Alan began. "Who sent you in here? Who paid you to come in here and start a fight? It isn't just the boot shoes and you know it!"

"Wait, hell!" the gunman growled. He lunged against the center table, sent it crashing on broken legs and scattering its neatly piled display of the latest thing in women's vici-kid high-tops. "There's yore fancy shoes, on the floor!" he roared. "An' now I'm givin' you warnin' to close shop an' git outa this town!"

ALAN WARNER was well-dressed, clean-shaven, usually with a generous smile for all, but he was no town softy. It had taken long hours and hard work, careful saving to scrape enough money to start this little shoe store in Rondo. And he wasn't letting any rough-tough gunman tell him what to do. Red anger burned in his face and his right fist snapped up to crack against Mott's flat-lipped sneer. The blow sent the gunman rocking on his long legs.

But fight was Ike Mott's eat and drink. He moved in, ugly lights in his green eyes.

"Yuy played 'er right, pilgrim." Mott chuckled mirthlessly. Scooping up one of the boot shoes he'd claimed were no good, he hooked the front sight of his six-gun in the elastic webbing at the ankle and ripped down, clear to the counter. He tossed the ruined high-heeled puncher town shoe to the floor. "*Now* you tell somebody them's first-class new shoes!" he snarled. His long left arm swung in a tight arc, smacked the bony palm of his open hand flat against Alan's jaw, sent his sprawling into a corner.

As if that wasn't enough, Mott followed, kicked his horny sock foot full into the store man's stomach. When Alan, sick and white-faced, tried to get up, Mott kicked him again, and reached out to bat him over the ear with the long barrel of his six-gun.

Lights burst in Alan Warner's head. He fell and lay still. The spinning store and Ike Mott's ugly face were all mixed up in his mind, swirling into a crazy pattern that was somehow tied up with Peg Castel of the Rondo Cowman's Boot and Saddle Shop. George Henderson, the banker, was in it, too, his thin lips barely moving, demanding immediate payment on the overdue note. And old John Logan was there, shaking a long bony finger at him, wanting to know why in time he was trying to cut into the Mercantile's stocking trade.

WHEN Alan came out of it and sat up amidst the wreckage of his shop, the troubled pattern of his dream was still there in his brain and none of it had been settled. But he didn't say anything about that to the pretty, dark-haired girl wiping the blood from the cut over his ear.

"I've told you, Alan Warner," Ruth Logan was saying, "that you've got to treat these cowmen lightly, with gloves on. Their feelings are close to the surface, even if they are big, rough men. Why, it was my dad's arguing with the boys from the 2-Bar-H that helped to drive most of the cowmen's trade away from Rondo."

Alan put a hand to his head and winced with the pain. But the pain went away when he looked at Ruth. The sick feeling left his stomach. The broken front window and the scattered shoes were forgotten. He always felt good when he looked at Ruth Logan, her red lips, the

big brown eyes and the wealth of black wavy hair.

"Ike Mott is no cowman," Alan said. "I'll bet anything it's Peg Castel, or that handsome son of his, Kirk Castel, that's back of this thing. Not only the Castels," he added, getting to his feet. "Your own dad would like to see me out of this town."

Ruth Logan stepped back, her eyes wide beneath her curved brows.

"Alan Warner," she gasped. "Do you . . . are you hinting that dad would hire Mott to . . . to kill you?"

"I didn't say that, Ruth. But your father is head of the Merchant's Round Table. Yesterday he came down here hot under the collar, giving me the old Harry for taking on a stock of women's stockings and men's socks. Said that was *his* line."

She gasped, and she said: "Are you hinting that dad would hire Mott to . . . to kill you?"

The girl backed toward the door, her small ovel face white.

"All right, you're mad, I've made you angry," Alan stormed, "but someone has to believe me. This town is so behind the times it rattles. There's not a merchant here that wants my store in Rondo. And why, I ask you? Just because factory-made shoes can be sold at a price the average man or woman can afford, it cuts into the high profit they've been reaching for the past fifteen years. Sure, Peg Castel can take a man's size and make him a pair of shoes, and it'll cost the man five or ten dollars at the least. He'll have to wait a week for delivery. I can sell 'em at half the price and they take 'em home with them. Castel and the rest of them are not driving me out!"

Ruth drew herself up, her little nose tilting at Alan. Her red lips quivered, opened suddenly. She didn't say anything, just stood there, poised like a bird ready for flight, looking at him and into him and through him.

Then she was gone.

PEG CASTEL was a big man, tall, heavy-built with a long bony face partly hidden behind a scraggly fringe of black beard. His long nose dipped down over his narrow mouth and the yellow eyes glared at the white-faced shoe-store man in front of him. Castel moved out from behind his shoe-maker's bench, his peg leg thumping on the plank floor.

"What the hell you mean, Warner?" Castel roared. "I didn't hire no gunny to put you outa business. I clean my own wash, an' if I want you outa this town—

I'll send you, understand? Now you're talkin' about it, though—it's a good idee. Yeah. You git outa Rondo."

Alan's eyes swept to Peg's son, Kirk, the saddle-maker. He was Alan's age, twenty-two or three, big like his father with the same ugly little yellow eyes. Aside from that he was a handsome man, smooth-shaven, dark-haired, broad-shouldered. He wore puncher dress. A breezy, loud-talking man who spent most of his spare time rushing pretty Ruth Logan, or hanging around the saloons.

Ruth Logan was going to be Mrs. Alan Warner. Looking at Kirk's sneering grin, Alan was more than ever sure of that. If he had to fight the whole town, she'd be Mrs. Warner.

Kirk Castel got up from his bench where he'd been stamping a flower design on the fenders of a big double-cinch stock saddle. He was a graceful man, his underslung high heels tapping the boards as he crowded up beside his father.

Peg twisted his big head, threw his little eyes on his son. There wasn't any kindliness in his glance, or in his tone.

"Git back to your work, Kirk," he snarled out. "This is between me an' this greenhorn. You tend to your knittin', or this slick-ear'll git your gal away from you. An' you, Warner. You kin sell out that store—to me. I'll pay you cost, after an inventory. I'll git the marshal to take the inventory an'—"

"You won't do anything of the kind." Alan's voice was harsh with anger. "I wouldn't sell to you if I was starving. And you can't push me out of Rondo."

"No?" Castel rasped.

Alan clamped his lips tight and spun out of the shop. No used talking to these Castels. They were out to beat him.

DOWN at the depot Alan checked over the goods that had arrived that morning. He found the boots, cowpuncher boots he had ordered two weeks ago—and the saddles. Six of them. Not expensive saddles; they retailed at twenty-two dollars and fifty cents. They were not cheap stuff, either. Steel fork, fifteen-inch tree, hide covered with wide felt-lined skirts, full seat and jockey in one piece. Good work saddles with no fancy silver work to cost money.

A grim smile pulled at Alan's thin lips. Now maybe the Castels would have something to gripe about. If they wanted a fight, they'd get it, right in the pocketbook where it would hurt.

He climbed up beside the livery man driving the rig and rode on into town. He got off at Logan's general store after giving the livery man his key and telling him where to unload the footgear and saddles.

"If anyone should ask about those saddles, tell 'em twenty-two fifty, cash on the barrel top," Alan said.

"I delivered them posters over in Red Dog like you said, advertisin' your sale tomorrow," the livery man told him. "Reckon you'll have all them punchers an' cowmen comin' to Rondo to trade tomorrow—Saturday. Especially to see them there cheap-priced boots an' saddles."

"You'd like to see them come back to this town?"

"Sure would, Alan," the livery man said, stroking his handle-bar mustache, "an' not jest me—there's plenty merchants in this town will be thankin' you all 'round the clock if'n you can swing them cowmen back to Rondo. Not thet feller in there," he added, pointing his whip at Logan's Mercantile, "nor Castel. Them fellers been runnin' Rondo too dang long."

JOHN LOGAN came out of the deep shadow of his store like a big lanky cat pouncing when he saw Alan Warner walking down the cluttered aisle of Logan's store.

"I ain't got no talkin' to do with you," Logan said, looming over Alan. He was tall and lean, bald and white-faced from long days in out of the sun.

"I know, Mr. Logan," Alan said, smiling, "but I had to talk to you. This stocking business—you were plenty mad about it. But shoes and stockings, boots and socks—they go together. I thought maybe we could get together on it and settle this thing without hard feelings. You

stock everything from a mouse trap to a mower, and I thought maybe we could sort of divide things up and all profit. Your work shoes and footwear are just a side line with you."

"I didn't ask you for no advice," Logan snorted, "and as president of the Merchant's Round Table, I'm tellin' you to sell out and git. And I don't want you goin' near my gal Ruth."

"You won't listen to me, then?" Alan let his gaze sweep the store, but Ruth was nowhere in sight. Bitterness claimed him.

"Not to no smooth-face tenderfoot kid like you—no!"

"But *you'll* listen to *me*."

Alan whirled around. It was George Henderson, the banker. He'd come in behind Alan, was standing there now, his spare frame in the long black coat cutting off the light from the street. He was a thin-lipped man, thin-faced. He lived with caution.

"That loan, Warner," Henderson said, "it's due, now!"

"Why, sure, Mr. Henderson." Alan's eyes were bleak. "I know, and by Monday I'll be able to pay you. Of course, I could pay the interest now, but if you'll wait until Monday, I'm sure I can pay the whole thing. You see, I'm holding a sale, starting tomorrow."

"A sale?" Logan's shrill voice beat in upon Alan's ears. "Young feller, that's what you're doin' every day. I never seen such cheap prices. That's what's ruinin' my shoe-and-sock trade. If you go holdin' a sale—" Logan choked over the anger riling in his bony frame. "George, you call that loan on this young whelp, or Castel an' me'll close him tight. It's gotta stop, I tell you."

"But you don't understand, either one of you, or Castel," Alan tried. "I'm trying to help Rondo. If my sale goes off as I think it will, you'll have the cowmen back here doing all their trading. Your high-handed methods have driven them off, Logan. If the farm families could easily make it to Red Dog, you'd lose them, too. I aim to settle in this town. I want to build it up. Service—that's what I'm trying to give, and earn an honest living in the meantime." Alan stopped. He might as well talk to a couple of window dummies, for all the good it did.

KIRK CASTEL turned away from the broken front window of Alan's store. Rage burned in his cheeks.

"There he comes now," he told Ruth Logan, sitting in the flashy red buggy drawn up at the boardwalk.

"You wanted to see me?" Alan asked, unlocking his door.

"What you mean stockin' them saddles," Kirk demanded, the savage hate thick on his tongue. "Ike told me he seen 'em haulin' some cheap hulls in here, but—"

"Not cheap—reasonable, Castel," Alan corrected.

"Alan Warner! I think that was an underhanded trick, buying those saddles when you knew Kirk was a saddle-maker," Ruth said. Red color lay under the whiteness of her face.

Alan's jaw was a solid rock. "I'm no gunman. I did what I could," he said. "They wanted a fight—they'll get it."

"That ain't all you're goin' to git!" Castel blurted, and got into his buggy to wheel on down the street.

Inside, Alan got busy, arranging his new stock, making signs on long sections of wrapping paper for the sale next day. But his heart wasn't in it. Ruth was against him. There suddenly didn't seem to be any sense in going ahead.

It was dark night by the time he'd finished his signs and tacked a big tarp over the broken front window. He ambled slowly up the walk, his thoughts confused. He turned in at Rondo's largest saloon, the Three Aces, moved to the bar to order a beer. He drank in silence, watching the men at the poker table and the others at the bar. Suddenly there was a stir in the doorway, and big Ike Mott entered the smoke-filled room.

The gunman spotted Alan and wedged up beside him.

"Didn't figger you'd have the guts to stay in this camp, after my warnin',"

Mott said, rasping it out so that the men at the bar turned to stare.

Alan put down his glass. His eyes met the gunman's.

"You want another lickin' like I gave you today?" Mott blustered.

"Get out of my way, bum," Alan said softly. He dropped a coin on the bar, moved toward the door. The click of Mott's gun hammer was loud, like the breaking of a dead branch in a silent forest. Alan froze in his tracks. He knew cold fear then.

The gun roared. Lead spiked into the door frame six inches from the shoeman's head.

Alan's tense body quivered. He turned slowly. "Go tell your Castels to hire a man that can shoot straight—at a man's face!"

There was a buzz of excited talk in the saloon and the men at the bar scattered to the corners of the room. Alan swallowed. He wouldn't let the fear show. A farmer grinned at Alan. He said, "Feller, you're a cool one. Reckon you'll git my trade from now on."

Suddenly the barkeep lifted his sawed-off shotgun above the bar and nudged Mott's lanky back.

"Try that again, hardcase, an' I'll blow you apart."

ALAN DIDN'T do much sleeping that night. When he walked out of the hotel next morning his eyes were deep in his head. His shoulders drooped. If the sale didn't come off as he hoped, he'd be done in Rondo by night. True, the signs he had made the day before listed substantial cuts on his regular line of shoes, but it would be the saddles and the new factory-made boots that would turn the tide. *If* the cowmen read his advertisements and came to Rondo with money in their pockets . . .

But by noon Alan's smile had returned. The cowmen *did* come, and the farmers, and they bought.

"I ain't sayin' these ready-made boots is better'n Castel's or more high-priced bench-made boots," one puncher said, "but by golly, they're plenty good enough an' reasonable on the poke. A couple pair of 'em is sure goin' to come in handy."

Alan sold two saddles to the ramrod of the 2-Bar-H. "Two for the price of one," the lean, bronzed rider said. "An' both of 'em sure ought to outlast one of Castel's."

Alan's till bell was music to his ears. He would be able to pay off the banker now. Maybe Ruth would look at things a bit differently, too.

About one o'clock the store had cleared out, the farmers and ranchers off to a midday meal. Alan took a breather, rolling himself a smoke.

But he didn't get to light it. At that moment big Ike Mott and the two Castels came into the shop, Peg stumping along in the rear and closing the door after him.

"All right, Warner," Peg said, "you're all done. I seen what you been doin', sellin' them cheap boots. It's either me or you, an' *I* don't aim to get outa Rondo."

"I lost three orders for saddles this mornin'," Kirk Castel said.

"This tenderfoot made me the laughin' stock of the town last night," Mott chimed in. "Fellers in the saloon are callin' me the Two-gun Pilgrim Buster—right to my face."

Alan felt for a moment that everything was lost. He glanced at the clock on the wall. Henderson's bank would be closing now, and the banker had told him that morning he'd have to fork over the money he owed him at closing time.

Then Alan saw him coming, old Henderson hurrying across the street. John Logan was with him.

"Warner, you're a smart one," Logan said, entering the store. "Ain't had such a good Saturday since I opened my place years back. Ruth an' me are thankin' you."

Henderson was smiling with his thin lips. He came in quietly, walked toward Alan, his hand extended. "My boy, I'm afraid we all misjudged you. This morning has been—well, the best, and I have you to thank for it all. About that note, if you should need a little extra time . . ."

"*I* ain't thankin' him!" Peg Castel broke in. The bootmaker had produced a gun from his pocket, a snub-nosed .45. He waved it at Logan and the banker. "Git in here an' stay away from that door," he said, and stumped over to slide the bolt. "Now you two are here, by damn, you'll witness the transfer of this here shop—to me. Savvy? This wet-nose has ruined my business."

"What's the matter with you, Castel?" Logan demanded. "This young feller has brought back the cowmen's trade. They'll be plenty business for you an' him, all of us!"

"For me, mebbe, but not for him," Castel snarled. "Warner is gittin' out of Rondo for good, in ten minutes!"

ALAN watched the Castels and Mott. Three bad ones for an unarmed man to tackle. Stray lead might hurt old Logan or the banker, if they tried to make a break. Alan leaned back against the counter. His hand closed around one of the high-heeled boots put out there for display. Alan stole a glance at Kirk, but the younger Castel was watching the banker and Logan for the moment.

Alan went into action with a speed that caught Kirk off guard. The boot swung up high and crashed down on the saddle-maker's sleek head, sent him groaning to the floor.

Mott spun half around, his six-shooter clearing leather in a blur of swift motion. It flamed and thundered in the little store, and Alan felt swift pain in his arm as he flung the boot at Ike Mott's snarling face.

The boot sliced across the room, caught the gunman's six-shooter and knocked it from his hand. Alan dived at Peg Castel, grabbed him by the wooden leg, knocked the big man off balance.

They went down in a tangle, Castel's curses ringing in the gun smoke. There was a pounding on the front door, but Alan was too busy to bother with that. They rolled, crashed into the center table, sent Logan sprawling. Then Alan got his hands on the fitting stool, raised it and smashed at the bootmaker.

Castel went limp under him. As if in a dream, Alan felt the banker and a couple of 2-Bar-H punchers lifting him from Castel . . .

Ruth was there when he came out of it, binding a cloth over the bullet hole in his upper arm. But the pain was forgotten when he saw the tears in her eyes and felt her warm lips brush his cheek.

"I've been a fool . . . Alan," she said.

Old Logan was patting his daughter on the shoulder. "It's all right, gal. Reckon *I* was the fool, but I sure seen the light. Rondo needs a feller with Warner's guts. Progress—that's it. Castel an' that whelp son of his can git over their sore heads in jail."

Alan grinned and sat up on the floor. "And Mott?" he asked.

One of the 2-Bar-H punchers laughed. "Last I seen that curly wolf, he was ridin' fast with a half dozen waddies closin' in on him. He won't come back. Reckon you've had all the high-heeled trouble you're goin' to have in Rondo."

Owlhoot Substitute

(Continued from page 11)

barroom knew it was done purposely. He shot the gun from Clancy's hand and managed to lay a streak of hot lead across his skull to knock him out.

And Sheriff Jones was the first man to lean over the fallen Clancy, to undo the heavy money belt. He said, "Ummmm. Twenty-dollar gold pieces! Donder where he stole them."

Anderson looked at Clem Shanks and his own sheriff significantly.

"And look. Engraved gun just like I

told you, fancy boots. And if that ain't proof enough, what's this? Funny, the poor guy just couldn't throw it away."

Jones was holding a sheriff's badge in his hand, engraved with the name *Mac Gordon* on the back.

"I recollect when the folks up home gave this to him," he said gravely. "He killed a couple of bank robbers. Later they gave him another, sort of fancy-like, like this one I'm wearing, but he was always mighty proud of the first one." He pinned it onto Clancy's shirt. "Well, mister, I guess it's the end of the row for you."

Marshal Shanks caught Anderson's wink, slapped Sheriff Jones on the back. "Nice shooting, old-timer. Now the boys'll take him down and lock him up to keep him for you. Reckon the doc will see him at the jail. Let's you and me have a drink."

Jones beamed. He had a drink. He kept right on having them. In fact, he was sleeping peacefully in bed at a hotel when the mob broke into jail and got Clancy. In spite of all that Clancy could protest, yelling and sobbing and slobbering, they hanged him high as Haman on a low limb of the cottonwood in the town square.

But it always puzzled Marshal Clem Shanks and Anderson just exactly what happened to Sheriff William Jones of Pawkuska, Oklahoma. He wasn't in his room the next morning. The steeldust gelding was gone, too. And so was the ebony-handled presentation gun. . . .

CONCHA RYAN set the steaming food admiringly before her man. "You," she said, in her throaty, caressing voice, "I will never understand, *corazon*. You say you know you passed his camp on the road in the night. Why did you not jump him then?"

"Well, honey," ex-Sheriff Mac Gordon replied, grinning, "I was trying to work something out. That money I took from the bank has been puzzling me considerable. I been worried about how to get it back. My conscience bothered me. I didn't want that money. This here Clancy sort of delivered it for me. And another thing, maybe we won't have to do so much dodging after all. You see the news is going out that that old renegade sheriff Mac Gordon, was hanged in Three Rivers. And maybe they'll believe it and get sort of discouraged looking for a dead man. Sort of a substitute that Clancy turned out to be. Got more coffee?"

Bonanza for a Waddy

(Continued from page 25)

night. Prob'ly took your money with that in mind, Jack, seein' your such an outsize feller. . . . Then you did hit Montez. . . ."

Jack said, "Miss May's about right, though. Kildeen and Jackson ain't big enough folks to run a blazer on Jubal Clap and the people come in here. They just ordinary guns, seems like."

Sam nodded. "I know you're right. . . . But somebody's been cheatin' and swindlin' and makin' poor Clay stand for it. They been usin' his reputation and trimmin' the suckers right and left. Then when he decides t' fight, they got rid of him and his only honest croupier, Donner."

"Who you reckon?" demanded Jack.

"Easy enough t' find out," said Sam. "Whoever's runnin' the place right now."

"Kildeen was sort of straw boss," said Jack doubtfully.

But Carolyn said, "It's someone behind the scene. Someone who directs Joker Jackson and Kildeen. They are puppets for this man. He probably has an organization big enough to keep those

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two in line through fear."

"That's right smart figurin'," Sam said. "Should we go in and gamble with this fellow?"

Carolyn said, "He has caused two men to be killed tonight. He must have a dozen thugs in there, among the customers, men we would never recognize."

Sam said, "We know either Mayhew or Ferguson is one . . . did either of them ever play with your brother in here?"

"Mayhew did," said Carolyn doubtfully. "But he's a broker, dealing in mining stocks, and very rich. He has a family, lives on the hill. . . ."

Sam said, "And is prob'ly on the verge of bankruptcy."

"This man, whoever he is," said Jack impatiently, "took me for forty thousand dollars. I aim to see him now!"

"Miss May oughta go out that door and get some law," said Sam. "There should be a town marshal or somethin'. . . ."

"Me, I don't seem to have lost any law," said Jack Timber. "Might get complicated, gettin' back my money if the law's in on it."

Carolyn said, "The law here favors local people."

Sam said, "There's someone usin' knives an' poison, and there was a Mex followin' us tonight and all kinds of behind our backs things. Ain't our kind of fightin'."

"These folks can't duck .45 bullets," said Jack. "They ain't *that* smart."

"They throw knives across a street into a hotel window," Sam said. "I'm only thinkin' about Miss May. . . ."

"I wouldn't dare leave you," she said. "They might grab me again."

"We'll just go inside, then," Sam capitulated. "The three of us. But be ready to hit the floor when the shootin' starts!"

THE ENORMITY of their task dismayed Sam somewhat. He led the way through the narrow room to the door, threw it open. He stood on the threshold of the gaming room, blinking in the sudden light of the chandeliers. The place was full of well-dressed, well-respected citizens of Virginia City. Mining superintendents, bankers, lawyers, visiting firemen of notability swarmed around the tables of the late Jubal Clay.

Somewhere there was a master killer, and Sam was willing to bet his life that it was *Señor* Montez, the Spanish Indian with no visible means of support, who always seemed to lose money in this establishment, who was hated by his own kind, tolerated by the great, and feared to the death by Jubal Clay. Yet Sam had no proof that this was so, nothing that would convince city folks. It was merely the flat deduction of his plainsman's mind, which could detect a trail of blood and follow it instinctively to its source.

He had not told Jack of his belief, because the big rancher would shoot first and ask about Montez later. He had not told the girl, but he thought she suspected, now that Clay was poisoned. Lethal drinks were not in vogue among western killers such as Kildeen and Joker Jackson. Those two would employ other means. . . .

Kildeen came from the crowd and faced the trio who advanced toward the tables. His voice was flat and cold. "You've been asked not to come in here. . . . I'm sorry, Miss May, they created a fuss."

Joker Jackson was against the wall in a characteristic pose, one hand on the gun beneath his black coat. The little Mexican wore a waiter's apron, Sam saw, the one who had been following them. There were other Mexicans about, men who had not been present last night. The colored servants had disappeared. . . .

At the roulette wheel, *Señor* Montez was balancing chips in his long, slender fingers. His beady black eyes, however, kept coming to the two men and the girl, blankly, disbelieving.

Carolyn said pleasantly to Kildeen, "I'll be responsible for them. They are my friends."

Kildeen's voice went up, "But we don't want them here!"

Jack Timber unexpectedly pulled out the note from Clay. He shoved it at Kil-

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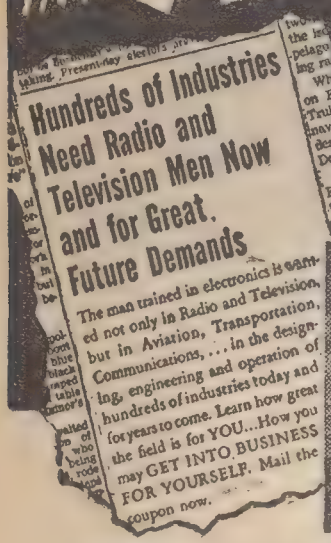
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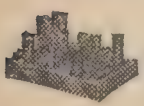

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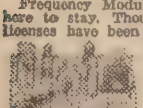

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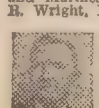

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deen and said, "Your own boss invited us back."

Kildeen did not look at the note. He said, "Mr. Clay has gone away indefinitely. I am running the club now. I wish you would leave."

Sam nodded. "That puts you where we want you, Kildeen. . . . How do you get all these respectable people out of here?"

Kildeen said, "You can't make a move without hurting one of them, and then you will be lynched."

Sam said, "City folks . . . but most of 'em westerners. . . . I wonder, now?"

His gun leaped from his belt into his hand. He roared, like a sudden foghorn in the night. "Duck, everybody! Heat's on!"

The gun bucked in his hand. Explosions seemed to jam the ceiling of the room. A chandelier broke and fell harmlessly on a dice table. People reacted according to their reflexes, their consciences or their experience. The doorway was jammed at once. A window crashed.

Sam grabbed Carolyn and threw her to the floor. Jack Timber staggered in the act of pulling his gun. A knife had clipped his arm, although no one was near him. . . . Again the mysterious weapon. . . .

Sam wheeled, kneeling. He saw a head, briefly, on a balcony he had observed before. A man with a peculiar, windlass sort of thing was attaching a blade, drawing back a bow-string. Sam fired twice, then set about reloading his gun as quickly as possible.

THE man was swarthy, clad as a vaquero. He stood up on the balcony, pitched his strange weapon from him, toppled over the rail. A woman screamed, "Murder!" and ran outdoors.

Jack Timber, the blood running down his arm, said, "Looky yonder!" Joker Jackson had a sawed-off shotgun, trying to get close to pour in a finisher at the trio. Jack shot him through the heart with a snap-aimed bullet.

Kildeen was retreating, his hands pushed out. Kildeen was city people from Chicago. A roomful of pulsing guns, with the acrid smoke burning eyes and nostrils was not for such as he. Mexicans of villainous aspect were coming forward, bearing arms. Kildeen was between them and the Texans. . . . He went down, from whose fire no one knew. . . .

Sam dropped his gun beside Carolyn and said, "Fire away."

Jack was reloading as coolly as on the range. Sam pulled out the Bowie and zigzagged across the room. A Mex dived at him, but Sam kicked him away. He saw Montez trying to get out with the last knot of Virginia City citizens, trying to lose himself in the crowd. A big man was bucking them from the outside, and Sam saw the star of the law on this newcomer's vest. . . .

He nailed Montez with his right hand. The Indian snarled, "Get away from me, you peeg!"

Sam spun him loose from the crowd. Montez drew a revolver not much larger than a derringer from his sleeve. Sam said, "You always forget I'm a lefty with a knife!"

He slashed and the gun fell, spitting without effect. Montez lunged. Sam propped him with a right hand punch to his dark features and pinned him to the wall with the long Bowie through his coat. . . .

Jack was sniping Mexicans, and May shot twice while Sam tried to haul the lawman through the existing mob. The marshal yelled, "What in tarnation's goin' on?"

"Clay's been murdered," Sam said rapidly. "By Montez and a crew of crooks."

"How d'you know?" demanded the lawman. "Stop this shootin'!"

"Sure," said Sam. "Jack, you stop shootin' those fellers and let them kill the marshal."

"Don't seem to be any more to shoot," Jack said. "Now where'd that gal go to? . . . She's some gal."

Montez, reviving from the wallop which had stunned him, said weakly, "Arrest these men, Donovan!"

Sam said, "Donovan don't want to do that. He wants to put you in his jail." Sam went close to Montez and dipped a

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hand into his pockets. He pulled out a small vial with a skull and crossbones on it. He said, "Jubal Clay was poisoned and I reckoned this feller would have it still on him. He is one of those Mex Indians. know about poisons. He came in here and got hold of Clay somehow or t'other and placed his men in here and began lootin'. . . ."

"Jubal Clay was honest!" Donovan said confusedly but stubbornly.

"Sure," nodded Sam. "But Kildeen and Jackson wasn't. And this Montez was going to take over, have Clay disappear and hold on through Kildeen until he could make a killin'. Which would be about two weeks with the lid off. . . . Clay knew what was goin' on, but couldn't stop it. When he got the nerve to try, through me and my pardner, Montez found it out through his spies and killed Clay."

"Kin you prove all this?" asked Donovan perplexedly.

"Give me Montez awhile," Sam suggested. "I was raised near some Comanches. . . . We're jest a couple of country boys, me and Jack."

Jack was bandaging his wound quite unconcernedly, keeping his eye open for further attack from any source. Sam looked guilelessly at the marshal.

Donovan said, "Montez is hurt. . . . You knifed him."

"Could've killed him," said Sam injuredly. "But I wanted to save him for you to question. You got lawyers and things in Virginia. Look into his past. Course, I know that ain't in the western code, but this here town ain't very western, right now. Too many folks. . . ."

DONOVAN said, "You can't come here and run a shindig like this free hand. I don't even know your name!"

Sam said, "Sho! Do tell! Well, whyn't you arrest Montez? Hell, he looks guilty, don't he?"

The marshal turned his attention on the Indian. The blood streaming down his arm, red and sticky, seemed to fascinate Montez, whose eyes had gone dull. No retainer appeared to succor him. Donovan took a step and placed his hand upon the man. Sam retrieved the Bowie.

Jack said, "Here's the gal now. . . ."

San ran across the room. Carolyn had a bag in her hand. Jack said, "We come in the window. . . ."

They went out the same way. People flocking back in got between them and Donovan. Montez slumped and Donovan caught him as he started floorward.

Jack went out the window first, then Carolyn, still clutching the bag. Sam hung by his hands, dropped. Jack said, "There's a train in ten minutes, I remember."

Sam said, "We'll write to you, Miss May. . . . The marshal don't even know our names . . . yet."

They were hurrying along the street. The drunken miners had stirred up even more trouble. They mingled with the mob, got through without incident. They came to the station as the train pulsed to life.

Jack Timber swung aboard. Sam held onto the girl's arm and said, "We lost Jack's money, but we busted up that Montez. . . ."

The girl said, "Hold the bag. . . ." She lifted her skirt. Her ankles were amazingly slim and shapely. She jumped on the steps of the train. She said, "Give me the bag and come on, man!"

The train jerked and Sam almost fell. He got onto the platform and protested, "You've got a hat shop. . . ."

She said, "Sam Hill, there is fifty thousand dollars in that bag. It was in the safe I've seen Jubal Clay open so many times when I paid him off. . . . If we can't get along in Texas on that much money, none of us is any good. . . ."

Jack Timber said reverently, "Lady, if it wasn't for Mary, I'd kiss you right here and now!"

She said, "It's not you I want to kiss me, Jack Timber!"

Sam said, "Hey! There's folks lookin!"

The train went lurching along. . . . They would have to get off before the telegraph could locate them. . . . And take to horse. Then let someone follow, Sam thought. . . .

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Anyway, his conscience did not trouble him. He had enough money to buy a little land, a partner who could help him build, and a woman to put in a house when he built it. What more could a poor waddy want?

Long Sleep Creek

(Continued from page 37)

it all come about I was right madded up, but the way yuh say it right straight out, I reckon it's such as matters 'tween yuh an' Cynthy. Yuh speak like a sudden man, Shannon."

Slim Pelky wasn't quite sure yet whether this whole business would wind up in a shootin' or a horse-whippin'. Why in tarnation hadn't he talked up when he had the chance? He guessed he'd never find a better boss than Dude Shannon.

Dude Shannon spoke again in that quiet way he had.

"The fact is, Mr. Callan, I was riding up to make such amends as I could, and to invite you and Miss Callan to have dinner with me at the DS tomorrow evening."

Slim Pelky watched the rounded breast of Cynthia Callan rise and fall with her quick breathing. John Callan's slow grin broadened.

"Seein' yuh put it thataway, Shannon, me an' Cynthy will be right pleased to take up yore invite," said John Callan.

CHAPTER IV

Angel On a Harp

SLIM PELKY guessed there never had been such a dinner served at what he had always known as supper time. Slim even forgot that his store clothes irked him and that his collar scratched.

If Slim Pelky could but have warned Dude Shannon how and why all hades was due to break loose, he would have done it. But it was too late now. Too late, for Slim Pelky was seated at one end of the long dining room table and Dude Shannon was at the other.

John Callan also wore his Sunday store clothes. His coat cuffs appeared a bit rusty, but his shirt was boiled white. Callan was seated at one side of Dude Shannon.

Slim Pelky never had expected to see the time when pretty Cynthia Callan would be apparently speechless. But for a long half hour the girl seemed over-awed, taking in the magnificence of the Cholla Valley ranchhouse dining and living room with brown eyes so wide they seemed to be frightened.

Dude Shannon had dressed as usual for dinner. The addition of Slim Pelky was an afterthought that Slim wished mightily had been forgotten.

Aunt Hannah, austerely garbed in black, bossed the two Mex maids who served the most remarkable chuck ever dished up in the life of Slim Pelky. Slim didn't know the names of half the dishes and he found it difficult to swallow.

This was wrong, all wrong, the way Slim Pelky saw it. True enough it had always been his belief that any woman would marry into riches if she had the chance. And Cynthia Callan certainly was being given that chance.

The table glistened with silver and chinaware on snowy white. The costly

rug, the grand piano, and all the other furnishings of the long room seemed to have locked the tongue of John Callan's girl. Slim Pelky still held to the notion that Dude Shannon was making a downright fool of himself.

Up to this minute, Slim Pelky had credited the boss with being somewhat shrewd, although this ranch had been created by money he had inherited. But this bold effort to dazzle the daughter of John Callan didn't have a chance, the way Slim Pelky saw it.

Old John Callan took in the furnishings of the room and the deliberate setting up of what amounted to a banquet with twinkling blue eyes. Callan watched his daughter, and Slim Pelky knew there had been an understanding between them.

"Yuh got yoreself a right smart setup, Shannon," observed Callan. "Maybe so yuh plan to git into politics."

"No," stated Dude Shannon. "I was fortunate in being born to good living. You see, Callan, I am sincere when I say I want everything I enjoy to be my own idea. Like, as I have said, I'm wanting my wife to be of this country so she will understand it, and yet have the advantages of the best there is on the outside."

Slim Pelky thought Cynthia's mouth shaped, "Oh, my gosh!" But the girl said nothing.

John Callan kept a watchful eye upon his daughter, but for the most part he talked of raising beef, the market, the weather, and the visit he said he had made to the east in past years only to become homesick for the Rincon range.

Slim Pelky imagined that Dude Shannon should have been warned by Callan's casual words. But Dude was giving this dinner for one purpose. Slim Pelky groaned inwardly.

Dude was trying to create an impression upon the girl through this show-

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ing of what his money had done and could do. Why in all hades didn't Dude start in trying to sell himself?

TOWARD the end of the dinner there was sudden, brief speech from Cynthia Callan. Up to then she had smiled a few times in the direction of Dude, but that was all. Now, with a spoonful of Frenchy's most delicious pudding poised before her pretty mouth, Cynthia had a sudden burst of words.

"I'll bet yore cookee got the idea of colorin' this puddin' from the figgers on that 'ere carpet!" exclaimed Cynthia Callan.

Whereupon, still staring at the yellow eyes of a dragon in the Oriental rug, she gulped the spoonful of pudding.

John Callan's head was bent then. Aunt Hannah glanced at this son of the East she had nursed through life. Slim Pelky put his mind upon a growling that sounded like thunder in the sky.

It couldn't be thunder, thought Slim Pelky. It was a month too early for rain.

Dude Shannon smiled at the girl who had the face of an angel, but whose funny ideas and speech indicated the necessity for some schooling in different surroundings before she would be fitted to sit at the head of the Dude Shannon table.

"Do you like music, Cynthia?" asked Dude Shannon, and without waiting for a reply he went over to the grand piano.

Again Slim Pelky had a notion he heard thunder. But when Dude laid his strong, quick fingers upon the piano keys, all other sound was lost. For many minutes the room throbbed with the music, which seemed a part of Dude Shannon's life.

Slim Pelky didn't know why the changing tones carried him into another world. This was the first time he had seen Dude playing the instrument that had been brought here at such great expense.

Suddenly John Callan started from his chair as Dude changed over to strong, somber notes that seemed to hit Callan like physical blows.

Then Slim Pelky was watching the odd gleam that came into the brown eyes of Cynthia Callan. The girl arose, moved swiftly across the room, her pink and white skirts swirling about her.

Dude Shannon did not see the girl move. But suddenly the deep tones of the piano had an accompaniment. Slim Pelky thought he had heard some real music in one town and another, but this was different.

Dude's head turned and his black eyes were upon Cynthia Callan. The girl's tanned, pliant fingers were bringing from the gilded harp such music as none but a master touch could produce.

Dude's strong hands crashed upon the piano keys. Then he stopped playing and turned, standing up. Cynthia Callan stepped away from the harp and never had a girl's smile been more angelic.

"Your harp has a remarkable tone, Mr. Shannon," said Cynthia Callan quietly. "I can recall but one that was more exquisite. It had been brought from Vienna to our school in Boston."

Dude Shannon appeared to be swallowing a dry tongue. Cynthia stepped past him.

"We've had a delightful evening, Mr. Shannon," added the girl quickly. "Come father, I've been hearing thunder. Remember the legend of *Long Sleep Creek.*"

Slim Pelky swore inwardly at having kept his tongue. For the girl added, "Goodnight, Mister Shannon. We'll be gittin' back to the shack 'fore this storm busts loose. My mind ain't been changed a mite about yuh wantin' to buy yuh a squaw."

CHAPTER V

"A Fool There Was"

NOTHING can so grind a man as to realize he has made an out-and-out fool of himself. By the same token, naught can so prove up a man as having the spirit to laugh at himself after his dumbness has been shown up.

Knowing these truths, wise Slim Pelky felt good inside. For Dude Shannon first chuckled hen shook with his own hearty laughter as Cynthia Callan and her father passed from earshot on the steep trail

leading from the valley to their bench-land ranch.

Although he was pleased, Slim Pelky was cautiously easing himself off the ranchhouse gallery.

"Whoa up, Slim!" Dude Shannon's voice was abrupt. "I have a straight question to ask you. Up on the hill you knew all the time that Cynthia had not been trying to misbrand the whiteface. Could it be you happened to know more about Cynthia than you told me?"

Slim turned his hat in his hands and gulped for air.

"Can't say I ain't been known' all the time that Cynthia Callan had some years of the best schoolin' in the East," admitted Slim. "Happened to hear it off-hand, an' I ain't given none to repeatin' gossip. I'll be quittin', o' course—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort," interrupted Dude. "John Callan certainly knew that Cynthia was playing a little game. Seems to me the music tonight hit him rather hard. Anyway, Slim, don't get the idea I'm quitting. Seeing I can't make Cynthia Callan over into the kind of wife I'm wanting, I'll go to her with my hat in my hand—"

A ripping, echoing crack of thunder and a dazzling blaze of lightning stopped Dude's speech. This was followed quickly by rolling, deafening blasts with what became a continuous flash of lightning criss-crossing the Rincon Range above Cholla Valley. Slim Pelky gripped Dude's arm. He shouted to make himself heard.

"Ain't never seen nothin' like that, boss! Look! There's two or three storms smashing together between the Four Pinnacles! An' listen to that roarin'!"

The Four Pinnacles enclosed three canyons the streams of which poured directly into the Cholla Valley, filling the lakes above the five dams during the rainy season. Never had Dude Shannon or Slim Pelky seen more than one thunderstorm at a time when the wet weeks came.

This was too early for the rains. There was no doubt but that each of the three canyons now was being scoured by the deluge from bursting clouds. The roaring between claps of thunder was the flood already building up.

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Now the rain started pelting the big ranchhouse. Slim Pelky shouted into Dude's ear.

"Up the hill there, boss! Them's wild, longhorn Injun cattle runnin' for the high ground! Here comes the squaw of Chief Wild Horse!"

The Indian woman could be seen in the continuous lightning flare that converted the valley to a weird sort of daylight. She came waddling up, one hand pointing.

"Big water come!" The squaw's voice was shrill. "*Long Sleep Creek* is awake! Come! Go! Indian cows know!"

The squaw turned and waddled away, turning up the hill as the first pelting rain turned into a steady downpour. Then came Jake Laner, riding, and with him were nearly all of the ranch cowhands, some not having had time for their saddles.

"Tried to git the cows headed out!" yelled Jake Laner. "We choused a few hund'ed to high ground, but most o' them dumb whitefaces is caught in the low meadows! Yuh'll hafta ride out, Dude, an' fast!"

SLIM PELKY was swearing wildly. Mountain cloudbursts wait for neither man nor beast. Already the glaring lightning showed a dark crest of water that spread all the way across Cholla Valley.

"C'mon, Dude!" Slim Pelky had to shout. "There's all hell busted in them three canyons! Them dams is goin' out like they were made of paper!"

Slim Pelky caught Dude's shoulder, but the boss of the DS iron seemed to have become immovable. Within incredibly brief minutes the raging cloudburst from the canyons of the Four Pinnacles was sweeping away the rock and earth dams that had made Cholla Valley a kingdom.

For the first time in a life blessed or cursed by luck, Dude Shannon was seeing all that good fortune had given him being swept away. The Indian squaw had vanished up the hill, following the wise longhorn cattle that Dude Shannon, with his herds of whitefaces, had looked upon with scorn.

The first wave of the flood flowed into the ranch yard and some of the men were turning loose the horses in the corrals. The water rose and Slim Pelky felt its first sweep around his legs to his knees.

Slim Pelky took a step, missed the edge of the gallery and then was half swimming through the torrent. The lightning flare was still bright, but Dude Shannon had disappeared from the porch of his house.

Slim Pelky reached a higher stretch of ground. To his relief he saw that the French cook and the two Mexican maids had got out, and that the wise Mexicans had saved Aunt Hannah. The older woman was crying and calling out Dude's name. Such lights as had been in the ranchhouse suddenly darkened as Slim Pelky saw and heard the north wall of the house sag and crash down before the rising flood.

"It's no damn' use!" groaned Slim Pelky. "Every last dam is bein' cut out an' there won't be a livin' cow in the valley come morning!"

Part of the ranchhouse roof fell in. Slim Pelky plunged into the rising current after sending the cook and the Mexican girls to still higher ground with Aunt Hannah.

"Maybe so I can slog through to Dude on a hoss," muttered Slim Pelky.

All he could do then was to fight his way back to a footing above the flood. All of the horses were gone. Slim Pelky could see Jake Laner and some of the boys trying to hold a miserably small remnant of the valley herd on the first bench above the flood.

A WILD picture showed. The two main barns went out, one falling and the other floating away without breaking up. It seemed to Slim Pelky that part of the ranchhouse had been lifted on the higher waves of the flood.

Still there was no sign of Dude Shannon.

"He couldn't have lost his head, he wasn't that kind," said Slim Perky. "But

what in thunderation took 'im back into the house?"

A streak of lightning running the full length of the sky gave Slim Pelky a sickening view of the complete ruin of Cholla Valley. Slim had heard Dude Shannon wonder why no other man had been smart enough to impound the rains into lakes and create a cattle empire.

Now Slim Pelky knew the reason. He also understood why a banker in Lone Tree and others hadn't talked, being eager for the investment of Dude Shannon's inherited fortune.

Slim Pelky cursed and shivered. He had no doubt but that Dude Shannon had been trapped and drowned in the ruins of the ranchhouse. There appeared no means of reaching Dude now, but Slim swore at himself for his delay and started toward Jake Laner and the others far above him.

"I'll git a hoss an' make a try at it!" grated Slim Pelky.

Then Slim Pelky was held spellbound by the sight of two riders plunging toward the ranchhouse ruins. The lightning showed the boyish figure of Cynthia Callan, with her pink and white skirts lifted about her waist, and of John Callan, spurring his roan beast straight into the floor.

Wave after wave of the cloudburst flood carried timber sections of the gutted dams. Luckily the lakes had been drained low by the dry season and only the torrent of the new storm was filling the valley.

"Git out'n the welter while yuh kin!" shouted a voice and Slim Pelky was looking up at Jake Laner who had ridden his horse nigh belly-deep beside him.

Half a minute later Slim Pelky was mounted in Jake Laner's saddle. A section of the ranchhouse had been swept to one side of the main flood. Slim Pelky saw Dude Shannon.

Dude was kneeling on a section of the planked gallery floor. Dude's black hair was shining with every lightning flash. Between Slim Pelky and Dude appeared Cynthia and John Callan and their horses were half swimming, half plunging when their feet touched the uneven ground.

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Off and on, Slim Pelky had been convinced that Dude Shannon was a locoed jasper whose chief virtue was his stubbornness and his lack of all fear. But there had never been such craziness as Slim Pelky now viewed.

"By glory!" grunted Slim Pelky. "He went back after that dangnation harp. An' he's got it hitched to some boxes an' floatin'."

Slim Pelky yelled, "Dude! This away! You can't make it out with that thing!"

Slim Pelky knew his warning could not be heard. Dude Shannon plunged off the ruins of the ranchhouse gallery, trying to swim and push the unwieldy float he had contrived for the gilded harp.

Slim's horse went swimming then and Slim slipped off, tailing the beast. His horse had found footing again when Slim Pelky gasped with amazement.

Cynthia Callan and her father had caught Dude Shannon between them. They were fighting their way back to higher ground. But the rope from the girl's saddle was attached to the floating harp.

SLIM PELKY reached the others just above the lapping edge of the roaring flood. Slim got off his horse and walked closer. He heard John Callan's slow, deep voice.

"Yuh see, Shannon, I was the first an' only other man to dam off Cholla Valley nigh fifteen years ago," said Callan. "The Injuns warned me about *Long Sleep Creek*, but I was a smart hombre. Every so often, the Injuns said, *Long Sleep Creek* wakes up an' it's madden by its long sleep.

"I had me a big herd, an' I built me a house that wasn't so fine, but I had a piano hauled out. Cynthy was a little tyke then, an' she never recollected it, or how her mother died. I'd been figurin' on warnin' yuh, but yuh happened to meet up with Cynthy an' I waited."

Dude Shannon stood there, tall and straight. He looked out across the intermittent darkness at the ruin and the loss of everything that he possessed.

Slim Pelky could see Cynthia's face reflected with each flare of lightning. The rain was lessening, but the flood was not.

Dude Shannon spoke straight out, as always.

"All I have is gone, Callan," he said slowly. "I've enough money in the bank to pay off my hands, that's all. One thing I've learned. I'm fit to make you a fair tophand, an' I'm respectfully asking for a riding job at forty per, Callan."

John Callan rubbed the back of his wet hand across his chin.

"Forty per is all I kin afford on the bench spread," he said slowly. "Yuh mean yuh'll take that job, after all o' this?"

Dude Shannon nodded, looking at Cynthia who hadn't spoken.

"An' yuh ain't nothin' else in mind, Shannon?" asked Callan.

"Yes, I've still something else in mind, Callan," replied Dude Shannon promptly. "As soon as I've saved up enough to start up a small spread, I'm intending to marry Cynthia, if she'll have me."

Slim Pelky was sure the lightning still running the sky could not miss Dude Shannon this time. It didn't.

"You bet you're marryin' me, Dude Shannon, after all the big talk you've made," declared Cynthia. "An' you're not waiting until you've saved up for another ranch. And just because you tried to buy me with a whiteface calf, you're giving me that harp as a wedding present."

"That's why I went back after the harp, darling," stated Dude Shannon quietly.

John Callan was a man whose laughter could be as deep as his anger. The bench-land rancher shook with his mirth then.

"I'll tell you now, Shannon, 'fore Cynthy gits to it," said John Callan. "Buck Hale was wantin' to marry Cynthy on account o' findin' a fairish gold streak on our spread, him thinkin' I didn't know about it. Hale lit a shuck out, an' I reckon I'm a mite too old to start workin' that claim."

Within the minute Slim Pelky knew he'd never meet up with another man such as Dude Shannon.

Dude Shannon shook his head.

"I'm still asking for a riding job at

forty per," stated Dude Shannon. "I couldn't buy Cynthia with the finest ranch in Job's Basin county. And Cynthia isn't buying me with a gold mine I didn't discover. We'll be married when I've saved enough wages to start a spread of our own."

Slim Pelky scrooched his shoulders suddenly. He saw Cynthia Callan tighten her grip on the wet riding quire strapped to her wrist.

Then Slim Pelky relaxed. The girl walked over, took Dude Shannon's face between her hands and kissed him.

"I was hoping you'd say that, Dude," said Cynthia. "I'm agreeing to your riding at forty per. But we're to be married right away. I've already made up my mind about setting up housekeeping in one of the line cabins, and there'll be a scandal about it if I'm not your wife when the word gets around."

The way Slim Pelky saw it, there wouldn't be many dull moments in the future lives of Mr. and Mrs. Dude Shannon. Slim guessed he'd take the chore of helping John Callan with his mine just to see the kind of brats the Shannon family would be bound to have.

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Six-Gun Gamble

(Continued from page 45)

all. So, pursuing that idea, he went from Andrade's to the hardware store, bought a box of carpet tacks and then headed for Deputy Jose Garcia's.

LOLLING BACK in his chair, the deputy sheriff and hide dealer straightened up when Joe entered his office. Worriedly, he said, "Joe, eet ees not good that you're een Sierrita now. Grute ees over een Cojo's, an' there weel be trouble eef you ron eento heem."

"N'mind him," Joe brushed Garcia's worries aside. "Have you got an' ol' cowhide, one that's no good, layin' around anywhere?"

Nodding, Garcia got up and led the way out to a shed in back of his office. Pointing at a hide hanging on a hook, he indignantly said, "There ees a torn one some crook put een a bale I bought."

When Joe, then, opened his pocketknife and cut a foot-square piece out of the dried, tough cowhide, Garcia was unable to contain his curiosity. "W'at," he begged to know, "ees eet for?"

"It's a hole card," Joe told him. "An' thanks a lot."

Watching Joe walk away, Garcia, like Andrade, was wondering if Joe Burnie hadn't gone haywire in the *cabeza*. Had he seen Joe, as the latter went over to the livery barn and into an empty stall, Garcia would have sworn that Joe was as nutty as a piñon tree. Kneeling, he laid the square of cowhide on the floor, took the box of carpet tacks out of his pocket and began sticking them through the hide.

A little later, when the hide had been studded with tacks, Joe left the barn empty-handed. Going back to his horse, he got his holstered Colt out of the saddlebag and buckled the belt around him. That done, he made a cigarette and stood with his head thoughtfully bowed while he smoked. Tossing the butt away, then, he drew a deep breath, squared his shoulders and walked down the street to Cojo's.

Cojo, serving two cowpunchers at the far end of the bar, scowled apprehensively when Joe came in. At his favorite table by the wall, Grute sat reading an old newspaper. Looking up, his eyes narrowed when he saw the six-shooter dragging at Joe's right hip, and then a hungry, wolfish grin spread over his face.

Rising quickly, Grute said, "Burnie, I wanta see you," and stepped over to the bar.

"Well," Joe grunted, "you ain't blind, are you?"

"You talkin' up trouble?" Grute snarled. "You'll get it, if you don't pay what you owe me for your critters grazin' on my range."

"T'hell with *you!*" Joe Burnie hooted.

"Burnie, I warn you not to rile me, or force me to draw my iron an' burn what you owe me out of your hide. So you'd better fork over the *dinero* an' ride close herd on your mouth. Savvy?"

As he spoke, Grute raised his left hand and began shaking his finger under Joe's nose. That was the move Joe had hoped for. Bracing himself, he leaned a little toward Grute and barked, "We both got guns, so stop the gab, an' *grab!*"

Grute, as they went for their guns, stiffened his left arm and rammed the palms of his upraised left hand against Joe's chest. For an instant, then, his features twisting, the fluid rhythm of his draw was broken and he jerked as though he'd contacted a wire charged with electricity. In that split second, Joe got the break he'd played for—but it was barely an even break and nothing more.

The guns of both men cleared leather and flashed flame and lead simultaneously. The only difference between them was that Grute, surprised and upset by the sudden realization that his trick to cinch a sure-fire kill had boomeranged, threw his lead away. His slug tugged at Joe's

shirt, left a welt along Joe's left side. Joe's bullets, placed with cold deliberation, smashed Grute's chest.

A horrible, shocked expression on his face, staggered by the force of Joe's lead, Grute dropped his six-gun and gripped the rim of the bar. Swaying, he tried to speak, but managed only a wet, grunting sound. That sound, then, became a hideous gurgle, and his hold loosening, Grute collapsed, his body wedging down between the face of the bar and the brass footrail.

STANDING there staring down at Ben Grute's body, Joe suddenly started shaking and his stomach began to roll over as the reaction of killing—his first killing—seized him. Knowing what Joe was going through, old Cojo limped hurriedly along the bar and thrust a bottle of whiskey into Joe's hand.

"Dreenk a big dreenk," Cojo commanded. "You be a-right."

The drink steadied Joe. He'd stopped shaking when Deputy Garcia, who was followed by the doctor, ran panting into the cantina. Stopping short when he saw that Grute, not Joe, was down, Garcia beat his fat palms together and cried, "Thees ees ver' good. *Ai, bueno!*"

"And a good job of shooting, Joe," the doctor said, after a hasty examination of the body. "But how did you beat his draw?"

Before Joe could answer, Judy rushed into the cantina. Tears streaming down her cheeks, her relief overwhelmed her when she saw that Joe was still among the living. Crying his name, she flung herself on him before he could prevent it.

"Ohhh!" Squealing, Judy leaped backward. Red lips parted, she pressed her hands to her breasts and eyed Joe in pained bewilderment.

Grinning sheepishly, Joe unbuttoned his shirt, untied a rawhide thong and pulled out the tack-studded square of cowhide that had been tied over his chest. Offering it to Garcia, he said, "My hole card, *amigo*. You savvy now?"

"Good gravy!" one of the cowboys

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who'd witnessed the gun-fight exclaimed. "So 'at's why the son kinda bogged down when he shoved you—he jabbed his paw on the p'ints of them there tacks!"

"Uh-huh." Joe nodded. "I got the idea when Andrade said that Grute was sharp as a tack when it come to dirty tricks. So I dealt me that hole card, gamblin' that Grute would try the same trick on me that he tried on Tim. Y'see, all I wanted was an even break—but I'm wonderin' if you folks think it was fair on my part?"

Holy smoke!" The doctor clapped one hand to his forehead. "He gambles his life for an even break, then asks us was he fair!"

"But he wouldn't gamble on marrying me before—" Inadvertantly glancing at Grute's body, Judy left her teasing sentence unfinished.

Taking hold of Judy's arm, Joe escorted her out of Cojo's. Motioning to the doctor to come along, Garcia followed them. Outside, beyond the crowd around the door, Judy and Joe halted and the doctor and Garcia joined them.

"You say thees so-poor sport won't marry you, eh?" Garcia sighed and shook his head at Judy. "Ees bad. I like for to geet up a *baile* an' dance een the plaza. A weddeeng would be fine oxcuse."

"Andrade could tie the knot," the doctor added.

"Not till our house's finished," Joe stubbornly demurred.

Impulsively, unmindful of onlookers, Judy flung her arms around Joe's neck, pulled his head down and pressed her lips to his. It wasn't a quick kiss, nor a cool one, either. As the seconds went by, Joe's ears reddened, Garcia became slack-jawed, and the doctor mopped his face with his handkerchief and whistled long and softly.

"There!" Breathless and starry-eyed, Judy at last let go of Joe. "Now, do you want to wait until our house is finished, Joe?"

"Momma," Joe exploded, "that settles it! Doc, you an' Garcia come along—we'll need you for witnesses."

Grabbing Judy's hand, then, he lit out for Nabor Andrade's on the run. . . .

Red for a Showdown

(Continued from page 57)

of the cottage he was balky as a mule. I got down and sneaked up as close as I dared, and stuck my head out from behind a tree and yelled, "Gram! Hey, Gram! It's me, the man with the beard! Don't shoot!"

So out she came looking pert and chipper as ever. We passed the time of day, civil-like, and I gave her the paint. She looked it over and said, "Humph! Appears to me somebody has already opened this can."

I said, "Ma'am, I opened a lot of them looking for the reddest he had and this is it."

She thanked me, saying at least it was better than what Ida Mae brought, but what could you expect of a girl that fell in love with a coward like Jeff Carson? She was still cussing Jeff, fore and aft, front and rear, when me and Jug rode off.

Well, sir, I rode right up to the stagecoach office and I went inside and planked my gold dust down on the counter with a *boom*. By now it was getting along in the morning and there was quite a few loafers there assembled. I said to the clerk, "Weigh it up, brother. I figure there's a little over one hundred and eighty ounces of gold there. I'm sending it to the buyers, Armstrong and Slagle, in Concha City. Just give me a receipt for it and see that it gets out on the afternoon stage."

Well, sir, I got my receipt and stood around talking loud about that shipment for some bit of time. Then I went up to

the Last Chance and began drinking, telling everybody that came in that I was shipping a heck of a lot of dust out on the coach that afternoon. The bartender tried to *shush* me and I told him to mind his own business on account of it was my gold and I'd talk about it if I wanted to.

I ran into trouble, though, about noon. A *muchacho* came in with a note from Big Emma, and much as I hated to do it, I went back to her house at the jail. She'd taken off the nice frilly dress and was crowded back in them worn levis and man's shirt.

SHE FROWNED and said, "Have you gone plumb loco? What's this about you shipping three hundred pounds of gold dust on the stage and going around telling everybody about it?"

I told her it wasn't nothing but one hundred and eighty ounces and she said that was plenty anyway. "You're begging somebody or other to knock over the shipment," she roared. "Well, sir, I'll tell you this. I'm marshal of this here town of Pensive and I'm riding that stage myself to protect your gold."

I said, "Now you listen here, Em—!"

She yelled, "Are you telling me what to do, Smitty?" And I remembered her pitching Jeff Carson through a window so I told her I sure wasn't telling her what to do. Not with her being the best danged cook that ever threw a batch of dough together.

And keeping on like that for a little while she looked at the clock and allowed she had enough time to whip up a meal. She did, and we ate it together. So right humbly I asked her about a little euchre until stage time. The stage left at three on the dot.

Although I was a little out of practice I dealt for my life and that euchre game got closer and closer and closer. Reckon it was nearly four o'clock before she realized that the stage had gone off and left her. Mad? Whew? I got out by the skin of my teeth. And it took all the nerve I had to stick my head back around the door and yell, "Just depend on me, honey,

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and if anything goes wrong you come looking for old Smitty at the Last Chance!" I dodged the little vase she flung and went right on down to the Last Chance to wait developments.

WELL, SIR, long about five o'clock in come High Hat Harry, leading his playmate, Russian Bill, by the hand. They sat at a table and Bill had a bottle of soda while High Hat hit the whiskey and glared around hoping somebody might be a stranger and make a crack about that tall hat. He glared at me two or three times personally and then settled down to his liquor. But I caught Russian Bill eyeing me once or twice.

Half an hour later the doors bust open and Big Emma was there, all wildeyed and excited. "You, Smitty," she cried. "Damn you, keeping me in that there euchre game until it was too late. I might have got the agents that killed my husband but for you!"

I said, "You mean?" Like I was shocked.

"That's what I mean," she yelled. "The stage was held up right out by Lone Butte and your gold is gone! The—!"

I said, calmly, "Could it be, ma'am, that them bold robbers wore grain sacks pulled down over their heads?"

"You know they did," she snapped. "They always do! Well, you feather-faced hyena, what are you laughing at?"

I quit laughing and said, "The day I rode into this town my horse, Jug, kicked over a rock and found a cache holding a couple of grain sacks with eye-holes cut in them." The babble sort of died away. "The cache was right out there at Lone Butte," I went on.

"Well, sir, I giggled, "I left them right there and didn't think much about them until this morning. I was carrying Gram some nice red paint, so I stopped by Lone Butte. I turned them grain sacks inside out and right along the inside seams I smeared considerable of that red paint. Reckon them stage robbers are going to be pretty surprised when they find they got red house paint on top of their heads. So there ain't no need to worry. All you got to do is look for fellows that got bright red paint across the tops of their heads."

She looked at me admiringly, Big Emma did, and yelled for a drink. Everybody was talking at once, but out of the tail of my eye I saw a couple of fellows making for the back door.

I yelled, "Hold it! You, High Hat, you been looking for trouble with that lead-provoking hat of yours. I aim to shoot it off!"

He knew this was it and he filled his hand. But the first thing a man learns in my trade is how to use old Judge Colt. I crossdrew, and I got him right on the bridge of the nose with my right gun, and right through the hat with my left Colt!

Russian Bill flung up his hands, blubbering.

Somebody who was kneeling over High Hat yelped, "By cracky, the ranny with red paint right across his bald head!"

Somebody else snatched off Russian Bill's battered Stetson and everybody could see Gram's bright red paint gleaming on the lemon-colored hair. But by then I was up close to Russian Bill. I stuck my gun in his gut and said, soft, "Keep your mouth shut, Romeo!" Then aloud I roared, "It wasn't bad enough for High Hat to be a robber himself! He had to get this poor halfwit into it, just like leading a child into crime, deliberately! The law won't do nothing to a crazy man! If we can get just a little sense out of him, the best we can do is run him out of town."

I said, "You, Russian Bill, we know you're crazy, but try to think a little bit!" I winked at the poor, scared feller. "Who killed Marshal Lane?"

He said, "High Hat."

And can you show me where you and High Hat cached my gold?"

He could, and did. And the last I saw of Russian Bill, who used to say Shakespeare back in Redondo, he was high-tailing it over the mountains for Concha City. I throwed a little lead after him just to speed him on his way, after having had a little private talk with him. He agreed hard that as far as he knew, Waco Tolliver always would lay buried in Pensive Boothill.

Tophand Owlhooter

(Continued from page 65)

other more intelligible oath that came from Clagg. Crippy, the crow, had flown directly into Clagg's face, half blinding him and diverting a slug that would have split Rusty's heart.

But Clagg batted the crow down and triggered the second time, his gun steadying. To Rusty it seemed that the whole room exploded. He was thinking a dozen guns had been fired.

There were but two other guns besides Clagg's. Neither of these was the iron that fell from Rusty's hand. For Clagg's second shot gouged Rusty's skull and left a streak that was redder than his hair.

That was why the room faded out, and why Rusty missed seeing grim old Mark Haber inside the batwings with a smoking gun in his hand. And it was why Rusty failed to see Clagg turn slowly and fall on his face, or to see Drake, the pock-marked gunnie, double over without ever having fired the gun he had centered upon Rusty.

Mark Haber's hard voice filled the silence inside the Paramount:

"All of you heard what Rusty said! I'm not sayin' Rusty robbed my safe or he didn't! I am sayin' he saved my son's life, an' I haven't lost ary money! I'm thinkin' Lije Holt would've been next, an' there'd been others as long as this Clagg skunk kept on livin'!"

Mark Haber bent over Rusty, lifted him in his arms. Haber roared:

"Is there ary one has a say-so comin', speak yore piece now, or don't do any talkin afterward!"

There was but one living thing in the room had a say-so.

"Gaw-gaw yuh!" squawked Crippy, the crow.

Mark Haber turned and strode from the Paramount Saloon with Rusty in his arms.

When Rusty awakened he would find himself still close to three living things that really mattered in his life, and one would be a bird—but what a bird!

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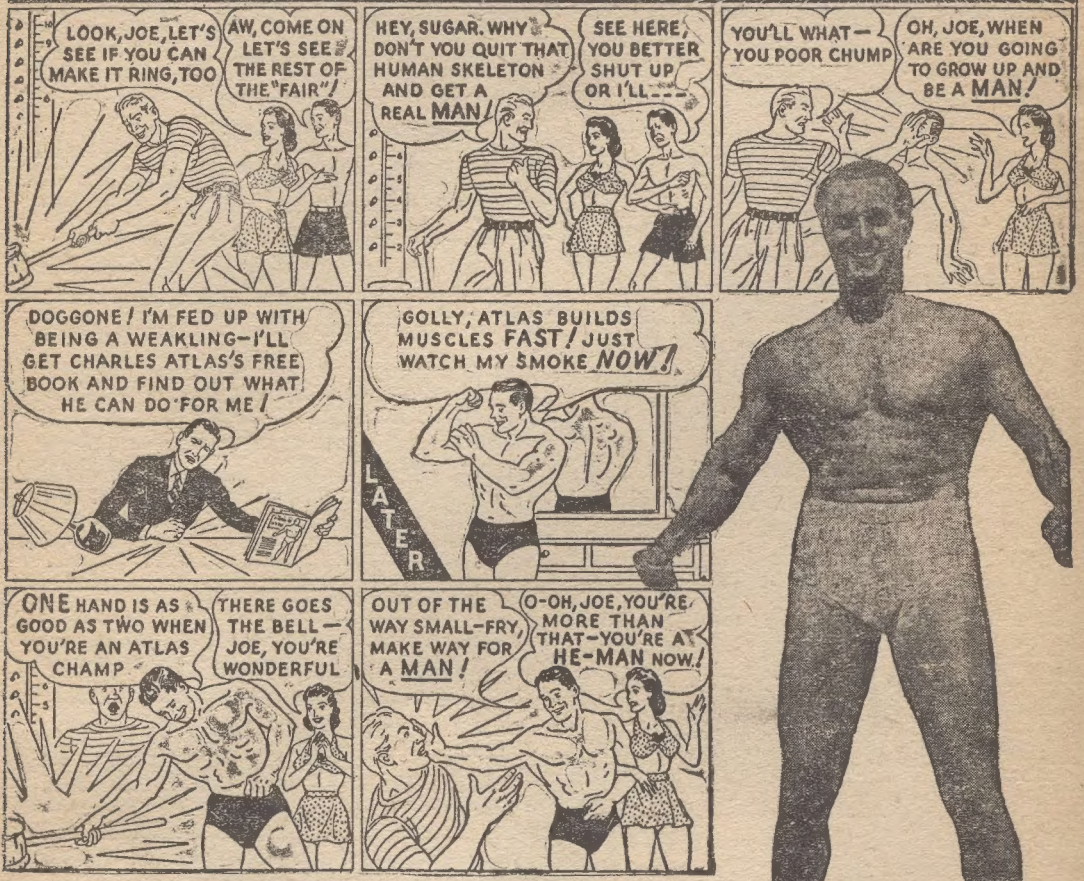
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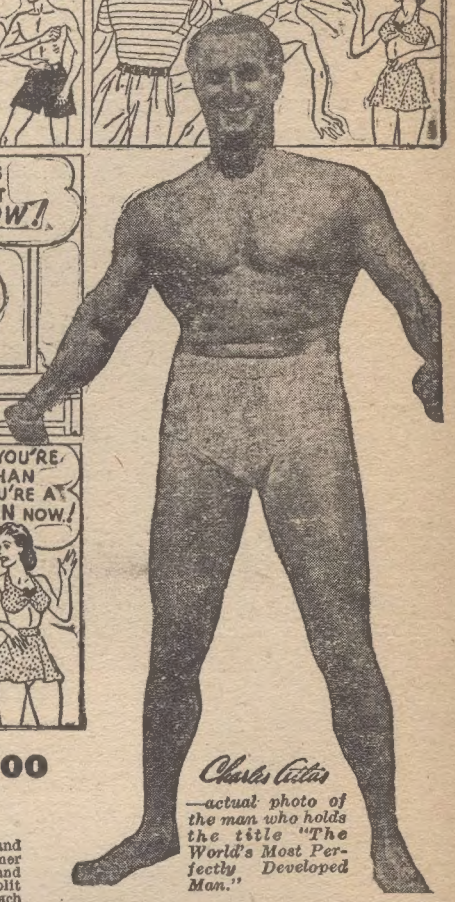

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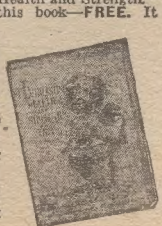

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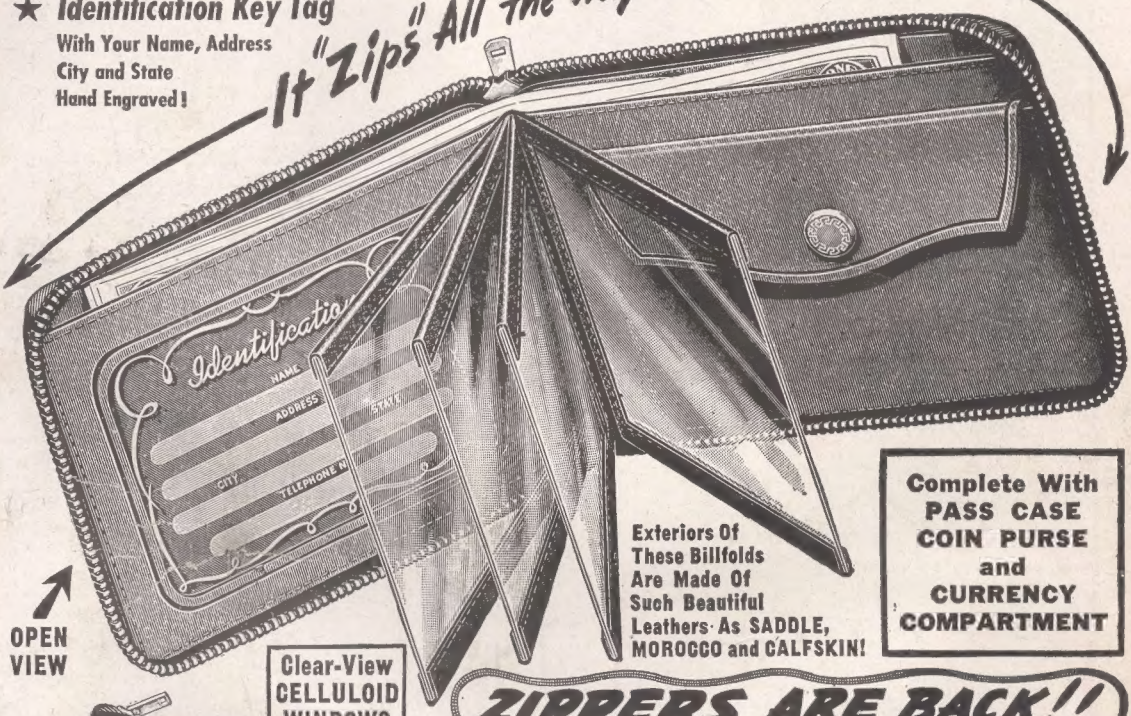

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Hand Engraved Identification Key Tag Included With Every Zipper Billfold!

We also send you this beautiful 3-color identification key tag, hand engraved with your full name, address, city and state. It's the ideal key tag. Provides ample room for all your keys with your permanent identification for recovery in case of loss.

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(PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)

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XC101 — Attractive Engagement Ring of 14K Yellow gold with four matched side Diamonds and a fiery brilliant genuine centre Diamond. $50.00. Send $1.00 NOW—pay $15.67 after examination — then $5.56 monthly.

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XC103—Massive looking gents "Gypsy" ring of 14K Yellow Gold. Two fiery genuine Diamonds with square cut, deep red simulated Ruby centre. $55.00. Send $1.00 NOW—pay $17.33 after examination — then $5.24 monthly.

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XC110—Secret photo locket of 10K yellow gold. Holds two photos. Beautifully engraved with genuine diamond in white gold setting. Complete with gold neck chain. $21.50. Send $1.00 NOW — pay $6.50 after examination — then $7.00 monthly.

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XC111—Lovely ladies ring of 14K Yellow Gold with white gold sides engraved to look like diamonds. CHOICE of GENUINE Topaz, Amethyst, or Aquamarine (State stone desired) $29.75. Send $1.00 NOW — pay $8.95 after examination — then $6.60 monthly.

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XC104 — Heavy 14K Yellow Gold, gents pierced Signet Ring. Two initials CUT OUT of Solid gold top to order. Handsome! Distinctive! Ideal gift for a man. $39.75. Send $1.00 NOW—pay $12.25 after examination — then $5.30 monthly.

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Pay On Monthly Terms

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